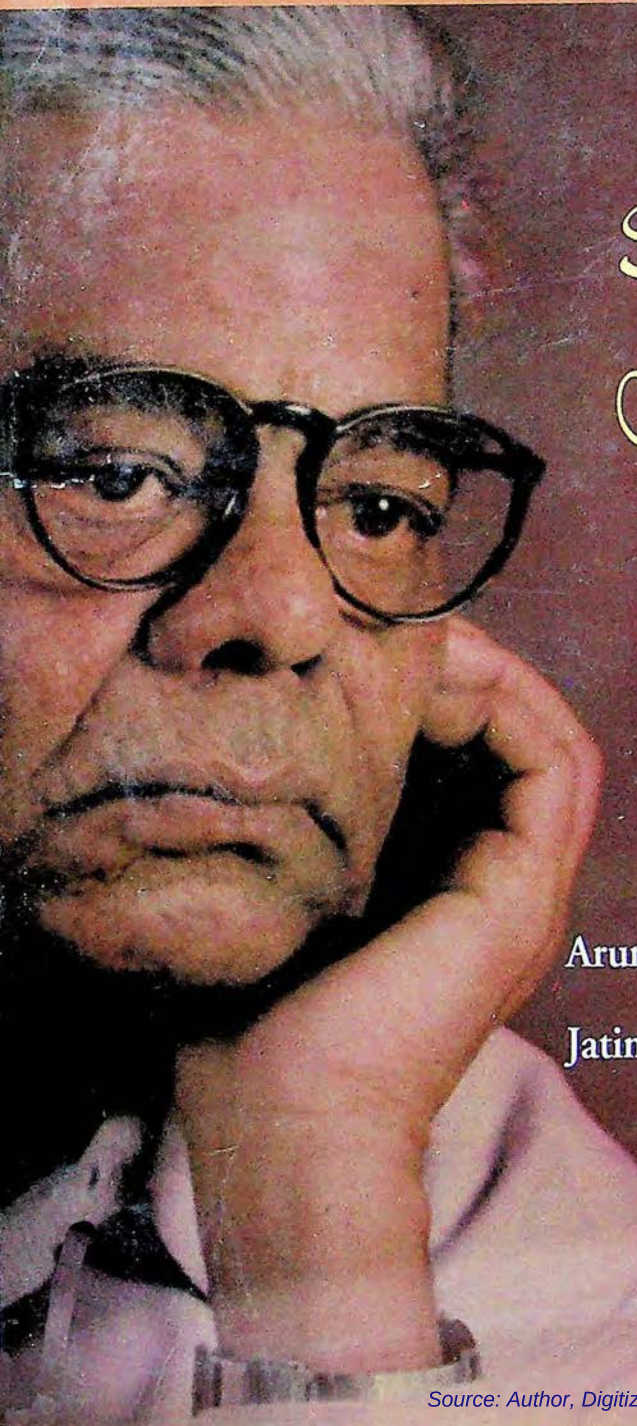
MANORANJAN DAS

A Dialogue with Memory



Translated by
Arun Kumar Mohanty
&
Jatindra Kumar Nayak

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

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NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

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For

Saswat

my grandson

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Manoranjan Das's memoirs, *Smruti Sanlap* (*A Dialogue with Memory*) tells the story of the evolution of modern Oriya drama. Two distinguished predecessors of Das, Baishnav Pani and Kalicharan Patnaik, have left vivid accounts of the growth of Oriya drama in their autobiographies, *Panikabinkara Atmakahani* (The Poet, Pani's Autobiography) and *Kumbhar Chaka* (The Potter's Wheel). In a way, Das begins his narrative where these two great dramatists end theirs. It is also significant that Das's dramatic works sought to blend the best elements in Pani and Patnaik and absorbed elements from contemporary western theatre. This led to the emergence of a new theatre in Orissa, which fused native folk forms with modern consciousness and techniques. Das's plays laid the foundations on which a generation of younger dramatists built later. Das's memoirs also make an attempt to analyse the cause of the decline of the commercial Oriya stage. He seeks to identify the limitations of amateur theatre groups in Orissa. The former suffered because of its neglect of the intellectual dimension of drama, and the latter was handicapped on account of its alienation from native tradition. The absence of a coherent cultural policy in Orissa, in Das's view, contributed to the decline of theatre in the state.

A Dialogue with Memory also records Das's experiences as a witness to historic events shaping the destiny of modern India. It is full of lively anecdotes relating to people and places as they underwent changes in the post independence era.

Das played a key role in shaping the cultural policy of Orissa, and in building institutions that would promote a strong sense of cultural identity. His rich experience as a dramatist, his participation in policy-making processes at the national level, and his acquaintance with western theatre helped him in playing this role effectively.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

A Dialogue with Memory radiates warmth and humanity. Though crowded with events, some of which are quite painful, the book is remarkably free from bitterness. It affirms and celebrates life in its totality.

In translating *Smruti Sanlap* we have profited immensely from the advice of the author, Sri Manoranjan Das. We express our deep indebtedness to him. We are grateful to Smt Kusuma Das and Sri Bibhu Ranjan Das for their support and encouragement. We express our gratitude to NBT, India, for publishing the English translation of *Smruti Sanlap*. We thank Ch. Manoj Kumar Patro for secretarial assistance.

ARUN KUMAR MOHANTY
JATINDRA KUMAR NAYAK

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I have written plays all my life. This is my first work outside the field of drama. Its scope encompasses a period of long seventy years. I had many things to say. So the task seemed daunting when I undertook it. Many questions arose in my mind. What should I write? Who would read it? And why? Should I write only about art, literature, painting, stage craft, the Akademis at the state and central levels, about All India Radio, Doordarshan, film institutes, amateur theatre groups and the commercial stage with which I was directly or indirectly associated? Should I talk about my creative self? Or should I include in it other things as well? Several other incidents which occurred in my life, several other scenes which still flash before my mind's eye, the many experiences which are still fresh in memory – are they of no account?

A few years ago, I wrote a play entitled *Simara Arapari* (On the Other Side of the Border). A character in it says:

Mita: The seventeenth century, the age of knowledge. The eighteenth, the age of reason, the nineteenth, of progress. And the twentieth...

Dr. Ray: (completing the sentence) of anxiety.

I was born in the first quarter of the twentieth century. I lived through the last decades of British rule in India. The non-violent struggle for freedom under Gandhiji's leadership, the country attaining independence, the functioning of democracy in the country, the wars and the completion of fifty years of independence are part of my experiences. The drama of political history of the nation unfolded before me. Changes occurred not only in the sphere of politics, economy and education, but also at other levels of society, in the nature and manners of people, their faiths and supterstitions, their ideas of morality and their values. All these blended in my memory and took the shape of a

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colourful rainbow. Should these not get reflected in my writing? Experiences of joys and sorrows, my own views and opinions are also stored in my memory. Should they, too, not find a place in my work?

I struggled with these questions when I began writing my memoirs. The writing took long five years.

I had written a preface to each of my plays. Since this work will serve as a preface to all the reminiscences of my life and times, I do not find it necessary to write an elaborate preface to it. A British novelist once wrote: "Don't trust the writer, trust his writings." I share his view. I feel, I owe to my readers to mention the difficulties I came across while writing an account of my life.

Several incidents in one's life take place simultaneously. So it is not always convenient to arrange incidents chronologically. However, I have taken care to mention the time of occurrence of the incidents. Of course, there are repetitions. Since I am in the habit of maintaining a diary, the time of occurrence of most of the incidents could be referred to without much difficulty.

My memoirs entitled *Smruti Sanlap* came to be published in 1999 by Friends Publishers, Cuttack. It is a matter of satisfaction that it received an enthusiastic response from all sections of Oriya readership. The thought that it might also appeal to non-Oriya readers crossed my mind. I felt that the English translation of my memoirs should avoid details having relevance only for Oriya readers, and, instead, focus on events having a greater universal appeal. So I edited and abridged the text keeping the non-Oriya reader in mind.

I take this opportunity to thank Dr. Arun Kumar Mohanty and Shri Jatindra Kumar Nayak for preparing this English translation. I express my gratitude to National Book Trust, India for publishing it. I feel particularly grateful to Dr Sitakant Mahapatra, Chairman, NBT, and Dr Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee, Director, NBT for the keen interest they have taken in bringing out this book.

Cuttack MANORANJAN DAS
March 2002

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

I am sitting at the balcony of my house, 'Pathachhaya'. The sun is about to set. My gaze is fixed on the horizon where the sky touches the earth, forming a semi-circle around the building, and tall trees in the east, south and west. Suddenly I feel a void in me. I raise my head and look in all directions. There are passing clouds, of different hues and shapes. Birds fly in search of their nests. The western sky is full of varied colours. The red disc of sun slowly sinks below the horizon. At the end of a day's journey it will soon be lost in the darkness of the night.

Often, at times when I feel lonely and listless, I sit on this particular spot of the balcony, which faces south. The place surrounded by different species of palm fills the mind with images and inspiration. But the journey of the red sun to the other side of the horizon fills the mind not with hopes, excitement or inspiration, but with clouds of memory. How fascinating is this game of hide-and-seek! But memories are sometimes chaotic, irregular, disparate, fragmentary and often painful. At other times they are clear, regular, fresh, vivid, warm and unforgettable.

The chain of my thoughts gets interrupted. Perhaps, someone comes. Abadhut Rao. As always, Abadhut comes in silently, unannounced. He is a strange person. He comes and goes whenever he feels like.

Abadhut sits facing me and asks, "Watching the sunset?"

"Yes."

"You have been looking at the sky for so many days."

"That's right."

"Many things flash across your mind?"

"They do."

"How about collecting and preserving them?"

"The life stories of only those people, whose lives are special, are worth something."

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

He stares at me wide-eyed, and says, "Specialty is a relative term. Pain and pleasure, thoughts and feelings, emotions and experiences of an ordinary person—aren't they special for him? The strange contradictions of life, stories of attachments and separations, and experiences of fidelity and betrayal, don't they constitute his wealth? Aren't they very special to him? If this ordinary person stands witness to the evolution of art and literature, music and dance, stage and culture during his lifetime, and plays a definite role in it, do you think there is no need for him to set down his views and experiences?"

Absorbed in my thoughts, I reply, "There is, and yet there is not."

Abadhut Rao continues, "You are not the final judge of this. Can you exercise control over what is necessary and what is not?"

"No."

Smiling, Abadhut Rao adds, "Do your duty, not worrying about what you should and what you should not."

Then he leans towards me and chants a sloka, as if he is reminding me, "Fare forward and wait not for the fruit of action."

I nod and keep quiet. Probably he realises my difficulties. He almost commands me, "Start writing."

I think to myself, "Should I? But begin where?"

Abadhut Rao solves the problem arising in my mind by asking another question. His ways are strange, indeed.

He says, "You must have read Lewis Carroll's *Alice in the Wonderland*?"

"Yes, I have."

"Then you can recall how it begins.

'The white rabbit in glasses asked: Your majesty, where shall I begin?'

"I do remember. 'The king in a grave tone replies: Begin where it begins and end where it ends.'"

"Exactly. Begin where it begins."

Abadhut Rao leaves the place as suddenly as he comes. But he has given me a clue: Begin where it begins.

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I was born on the 25th of July 1921, at village Jharkata Patana in the district of Cuttack. My father's name is Artabandhu Das and mother's, Sulochana Dei.

If one goes to this village and asks someone, 'Where is the daroga's house?' He would point to a house in the middle of the village. Towards the east. There are so many *sahis* in the village: Brahmin *sahi*, Das *sahi*, Barik *sahi*, Badhei *sahi*, and so on. But our house was not a part of any of these *sahis*; it stood apart. When I was born, a house consisting of three wings stood there. There was a pond at the back. Mango groves stood behind it on one side.

Our village was situated on an island created by the branching of the river Kathajodi near the railway bridge at Cuttack. During the days of my childhood, floodwaters flowed into our village and nearby villages. Like a few houses in the village, ours was built on a raised ground. Floodwaters, five to six feet high, flowed along the village road and we had to move about in rafts made of banana trunks.

When floodwaters entered a few houses, people would come to our house seeking shelter. Our uncle, Natabar used to comfort us, saying there was nothing to be afraid of. "The flood waters can flow over the steps and come as far as the *choura* only after it enters the courtroom of the Collector in Cuttack after crossing the ghat there. Our rooms lie higher than the *choura*. The government would make a breach in the embankment at some point down the river, if it comes to that. So don't worry." I cannot say if any breach was ever made anywhere; but to my knowledge, floodwaters never entered either the Collectorate in Cuttack or our house.

Natabar uncle used to manage the land of the family and its properties. He knew quite a lot about our forefathers. From whatever I heard from him and whatever facts I gathered subsequently, I reconstruct the family history like this.

In the years prior to Orissa coming under British rule in 1803, our forefather Gangaram Munshi was sent from Cuttack by the *Marhatta* subedar to the stretch of land known as Baialish Mouza, which was surrounded by the two branches of the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

river Kathajodi. Hunting was one of the chief pastimes of the feudal *Marhattas*. Sometimes they ferried across the river and set up camp in this region for hunting. And, in a royal style, they brought with them soldiers, officials and servants. Provisions and other essentials were also brought over. An advance party used to come here to make arrangements for the hunting expedition. One year, Gangaram led the advance party. This was what his forefathers used to do. Since they used to keep the accounts in the office of the Marhatta Subedar, they were called 'Munshis'. We do not know how Gangaram, who came to the village about two hundred years ago to make arrangements for the hunting expedition, lost his job as the Munshi and became the Daroga. Anyway, Gangaram settled in Patana village in Baialish Mouza. Probably because he was the Daroga, his family came to be known as the Daroga family. But there is no doubt that ours was a Kshatriya family, and its succeeding generations gradually took to reading, writing and keeping of the accounts. In my childhood, a *lekhani* or stylus was worshipped on Dussehra every year, and alongside it a sword, which had been preserved for generations.

The large village close to ours is called Bentakar. There was a forest near the village. When I was a boy what was left of this was called Dankakuda forest. This forest was home to tigers, panthers and deer. Since the area was the camp site for hunting expeditions called *bentas* during the Marhatta rule, the village came to be known as "Bentakar."

Although a number of villages surrounded Patana, they were separated from each other by mango groves, big and small. The Marhatta rulers, who came there for hunting, soon took note of the fertile land. In course of time, the Baialish Mouza area was brought under the plough. Since the 'Jhada' forest was cleared in order to pave the way for cultivation, the village which came into being was called Jharakata. This village along with the village Patana constituted Jharakata Mouza in the settlement documents. A majority of the people of Jharkata happened to be peasants. The adjacent villages are Berhampur, Aini and Sisua. What marked out Patana village

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is the fact that people belonging to different castes lived in it. This was not the case with the neighboring villages. In the past, it was necessary to have people of different occupations in a village to meet the needs of an agrarian society. Perhaps in order to cater to the requirements of the people of the villages nearby, arrangements were made to settle in Patana village families belonging to several castes, if not all the thirty-six. It seems likely that our village was the first to be set up in this locality.

By the time I was born, the Daroga family in Patana village had already been five generations old. The family had already split into two. Later, in course of time, there came further divisions and subdivisions. But in spite of all this, the old Daroga family did not lose its original identity.

Our house, which consisted of three sections, stood out in the village. Crossbeams with delicate carvings supported the roof. The single door of the front room, seven feet by four and a half, was the main entrance to the house. Strips of carved rosewood had been fixed on the door. Brass knobs had been driven into points where long strips had intersected. The door was shut by means of a wooden bar. Earthen verandahs ran along both sides of the rooms. The courtyard in the outer section was quite large and the front room served as a drawing room. Next to it lay the puja room, in which idols were offered worship and palmleaf *pothis* were preserved. The kitchen and the granary were in the inner sections. A few years after my birth, a room was added to the south-east of the main section, which was mostly used by the girls of the family. It also doubled as a guestroom.

I remember that during my childhood, there were quite a few educated persons in our area, particularly in Patana and Bentakar villages. Although the villages in Baialish Mouza are quite close to the city of Cuttack, they got cut off during the rainy season, especially when floods came. Facilities for communication and education were not adequate. Health services were almost non-existent. Just as the area below an oil lamp remains unlit, this place near the city remained neglected. The

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educated people, who had taken up jobs elsewhere, preferred to settle in their places of work. In time, their bonds with their village grew weaker. However, the situation changed rapidly, when a bridge over the river Kathajodi at Baialish Mouza got constructed.

My father was serving the zamindar of Kujang when I was born. Kujang was one of the several estates, which had passed into the possession of wealthy Bengalis by virtue of the sunset law. The Maharaja of Bardhman had purchased the estate of Kujang. Although the affairs of the zamindari were managed at Bardhaman, the estates' headquarters were located at Anantapur also known as Kujang. The distance from Patana to Kujang was not a short one, considering the transport facilities available in those days. It was forty-six miles from Cuttack, if one took the road along the Taladanda canal. We had to walk the distance from our village to the bridges over the canal at Biribati. From there we had to travel along the Cuttack-Kujang road. There was a motorable road up to Tarapur, and from there we had to either walk or ride a bicycle or a bullock cart. It took one full day or even a little longer to reach Kujang from our village. A few traveled by boat from the dock at the old warehouse in Cuttack. It took two full days, if one chose this mode of transport.

My father had come to Kujang, the Orissa headquarters of the Kujang estate by the sea, in search of a living, driven by circumstances like a leaf swept by a current. He had studied up to Matriculation in Victoria High School, Cuttack. Mahananda, son of the famous litterateur, Biswanath Kar, and S. Roy, who later became the Principal of Ravenshaw College, were his classmates. After finishing school, father underwent training as a sub-overseer at Cuttack. This educational qualification was sufficient at that time to find a job.

Although I was not born when my father took up his job in Kujang, my past and future were inextricably intertwined with this place. Was it ordained by fate that Kujang should leave an indelible impress on my life and my consciousness?

I wrote the play, *Banahansi* (The Wild Swan) in 1968. I

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had brought the wheel of time to a stand still and brought past, present and future into one straight line. In this play, Gita, the unborn daughter of Usha Sharma, comes to meet Rajib, the five-year-old son of Dr Prabir Choudhury. She meets Dr Choudhury and asks him:

Gita : Are you Rajib's daddy?
Dr Choudhury: That's right. And you?
Gita : I am Gita. I have come to meet Rajib.
Dr Choudhury: (surprised) Rajib?
Gita : Why? Is he not home?
Dr Choudhury: Yes, he must be there.
Gita : But I had an appointment with him in the evening.
Dr Choudhury: (surprised again) Rajib gave you an appointment?
Gita : I told him, I would not go to your house. Rather you come to the park, sharp at seven. We would spend some time there.
Dr Choudhury: Which Rajib are you talking about?
Gita : Rajib, Surgeon Prabir Choudhury's son. Of late, we have fallen in love.
Dr Choudhury: But Rajib...
Gita : You've made me laugh. What do you want to say... Your Rajib is just a child?
Dr Choudhury: Exactly.
Gita : No, time has advanced by twenty years in the mean time. He is a young man of twenty-five. I'm yet to be born. Nevertheless (smiling) I'm twenty. Can you stop the movement of time?

The future finds itself revealed in the present in this play. After twenty years, the twenty-five year old Rajib, the son of Dr Prabir Choudhury, meets Mrs. Usha Sharma's daughter, Gita. Time future is contained in time past. When the 'future' becomes the 'present', the hidden realities come to the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

surface. Likewise, my ties with Kujang were already taking shape in the past, right from the day of my father getting a job there, in the days I was not yet born.

In the beginning, my father was assigned the duty of deciding how much revenue should be levied on betel vines raised on the sand dunes in coastal villages. While touring those places, he used to stay in the *math* at Gada Kujang. Gada Kujang was centrally located and large villages on the seashore surrounded it. From Anantpur, the headquarters of the Kujang estate, a narrow road, about 8 miles long, ran through the villages, led to Gada Kujang. It was the capital of the Sandha dynasty, which once ruled Kujang. Gada Kujang was a large village, and most of the villagers were either farmers or fishermen. When one passed the Balitutha Ghat and the bushy mangrove forest on either side and reached the village, one saw the crown of a temple, which put one in the mind of the temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri. Lord Kunjabihari was worshipped in this temple. Legend has it that Kalapahada attacked the temple of the Lord at Puri and he wanted to destroy the idol. But one Bishar Mohanty very cleverly brought the *nabhi* and hid it here, in this forest on the seashore. Later, it was placed in the idol of Lord Jagannath at Puri.

The *math* of Gada Kujang lay on one side of the grand road, quite close to the temple. This math enjoyed special privileges during the rule of the Sandha kings. The *math* had a lot of landed property. Bhagabat Das, the Mahanta of the *math*, who belonged to the Nahangi sect, was widely respected by the people. He was a celibate.

He had not received much education and he was a good man. Lord Raghunath was worshipped in the *math*. As a result of his frequent visits to Gada Kujang, my father's relationship with Bhagabat Das grew very close. One day, *arati* was being offered to the Lord and Mahant Bhagabat Das stood before the deity with folded hands. My father and a few elderly persons were also there. Among those present was an old man, who stood out from the rest. He held something under his arm and had covered himself with a shawl. At the end of

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the *arati*, everyone bowed to the Lord, religious matters were discussed and small talk was exchanged.

Mahant Bhagabat Das now said, "Arta babu, I had sent word to Bira Abadhan." The lean astrologer, who belonged to a distant village, seemed extremely grateful for being thus honoured. He said, "Sir, I had some work at Anantapur. I was planning to come to Gada Kujanga on my way back from there. But when I received the Mahant's message, I came here straight taking a short cut. If the Mahant sends for me, I would come even from the land of Yama."

Everyone burst into laughter. But no one knew what the Mahant's message was. The soft-spoken Mahant explained, "I had sent the horoscope of Arta babu to the *Abadhan*. Arta babu would spend this week in the math for the settlement of betel vines. I thought it would be useful if the *Abadhan* could come over here during his stay." Bira Abadhan opened the bundle he carried under his arms. It contained my father's horoscope, the almanac and a notebook.

He said, "I have carefully studied Arta babu's horoscope. Fortune will always smile on him." Then he went to give the details, taking into account the relative position of the stars. My father listened to him silently and attentively.

The Mahant said, "*Abadhan*, will all your predictions come true." Perhaps the *Abadhan* felt a little hurt. He kept quiet. He took the glasses off the bridge of his nose, looked up at Lord Raghunath and bowed with folded hands. Then he said," Your Holiness, there is no way I can convince you that predictions which I make after studying Arta babu's horoscope thoroughly will come true. But one prediction I am going to make and if it won't come to pass, I shall give up astrology. I will also leave my almanac here, before Lord Raghunath."

Everyone was stunned at Bira Abadhan's audacity. They were also no less curious. What was the prediction for which he was going to risk his profession? The Mahanta said, "Tell us what is going to take place?"

Bira Abadhan leaned towards the lamp and went over the horoscope again and made a few more calculations with

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his fingers. He consulted his note-book and said," The horoscope says, Arta babu will be blessed with a son next year in the month of Shrabana." The next Shrabana was fifteen months away.

My father, who was silent all through, said, "Dear *Abadhan*, if the future could be foretold through these calculations, what is there for man to worry about?"

Bira Abadhan said, "Sir, you are an English-educated person. So I can't argue with you. Still I give you my word, if my predictions are proved wrong, I shall give up astrology forever. But if they turn out to be right, what will you give me?" The Mahanta said, jokingly, "Tell me what do you want Arta babu to give you?"

My father said, "You decide, what will be given to the *Abadhan*."

The atmosphere was becoming charged and everyone had got into a betting mood. Even the Mahanta could not decide what my father should give to the *Abadhan*. Bira Abadhan himself suggested a solution, "The light of the lamp fell on the face of Lord Raghunath at the time of *arati*. It looked bare and unadorned. A gold crown would make the Lord's head look beautiful. If you are blessed with a son the next Shrabana, offer a gold crown to the Lord. This *Abadhan* asks nothing for himself."

Bira Abadhan's predictions came true. After fifteen months, I took birth. For his part, my father kept his word. A gold crown adorned Lord Raghunath's head.

My childhood was a happy one. My cousin sisters, older than me, took loving care of me. They carried me around on their hips. If I was unruly, they also disciplined me by giving me a slap or two. I remember indistinctly: One morning, the front room was cleaned and the floor was given a coat of cow dung and mud. After the floor dried, a circle was drawn with *murujas* of different colours. A brass plate filled with *ãrua* rice, *duba* grass, *barakoli* leaves, vegetables and a big piece of chalk were placed inside the circle. Two wooden seats were kept on both sides. Pandit Shridhar Acharya occupied one of these,

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wearing a new cloth, I sat on the lap of Natabar uncle, who occupied the other. After offering *puja*, the *pundit* put the chalk in my hands and wrote "Om, Shri" on the floor. After this, uncle placed my hand on the plate and emptied it onto the pundit's shawl. My mother brought a little more rice and added it to what had already been offered. The pundit chanted *slokas*, gave me his blessings and left. Pundit Shridhar Acharya was the elder brother of Pandit Banambar Acharya, a renowned scholar.

This was a ritual, which marked the beginning of a child's education. There was a *chatsali* at the place where now a school stands. But I never attended this *chatsali*. Das aja, the old teacher, used to come to our house and give me lessons in our front room. In course of time, a couple of boys from our neighbourhood also joined me.

When I was nine, I was sent to Cuttack. Banambar Das, one of my uncles, served in the Police Department. One of my cousins, Pratap, the son of Bipra uncle, was staying with him. He had just taken up a job in the office of the Revenue Commissioner. Banambar uncle had already bought a house in Budhi Thakurani lane.

I was admitted to class-IV in Ravenshaw Collegiate School. I stayed in the house of Banambar uncle till I was twelve or thirteen. My mother lived in the village, and I used to visit her frequently. On weekends, I would often come to the village with my uncle or my cousin. At times I stayed longer at home, particularly during vacations. On these occasions, Agana, the loyal milkman, used to accompany me on my return journey to Cuttack. Sometimes, when my legs failed me, he would carry me on his shoulders. When I grew a little older, it was no longer possible on his part to carry me in this manner; so I covered the entire distance by foot. The pain of walking on the sands of river Kathajodi is still fresh in my mind. When the sands became too hot, Agana would spread his *gamchha* on the sands and I stood there awhile in order to cool my feet, then I would resume walking.

I had close contact with my village till I left for Kujang to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

pursue my studies there. I loved my village deeply. Life in the village flowed along a different course those days. Electronic media had not yet spoiled the rural culture. Every thing about the rural world had distinctiveness about it.

During the Raja festival young men of the village played *dudu*. Goats were killed in the village grove and the villagers bought goat meat. Girls in new clothes went from one house to another to distribute betel cones. They would ride swings, singing songs.

The moonlit night on Kumar Purnima resounded with the songs of village girls, who played a game called *puchi*. They also played a game of cowries. They sang in unison songs celebrating the festival. The girls of one part of the village entered into song competitions with those in the other. The tides of happiness overflowed the village. The poet Balakrushana Patnaik, who composed the song "*Kuanra punei jahna lo* (O the moon of Kumar Purnima...)" belonged to the neighbouring village, Bentakar; he later migrated to Athagarh. He was an ardent nationalist. Utkal Gaurav Madhu Sudan and Utkalmani Gopabandhu were his ideals. Balakrushna composed melodious and heart-touching lyrics. Young unmarried village girls under a moonlit sky sang his songs.

During *Dola* festival, the gods sitting in *vimanas* (wooden chariots) were carried from house to house where offerings were made to them. But, unfortunately, a section of the villagers, the untouchables could not take part in these boisterous festivals; they only watched the dazzling spectacle from a distance. Like other villages in the area, ours too was buried under the darkness of ignorance and superstition.

The benefits of modern education had not yet spread to the village. In all of Baialish Mouza, there was not a single high school; there was only a Middle English school at Bentakar. The state of women's education was deplorable at the time. A grown-up girl going to school was something unimaginable then. A few Brahmin, and Karan girls, and girls from a few affluent families went to the *chatsali*; children of the untouchables sat apart.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Although the songs of girls filled the village and broke its silence, the same girls, after they grew up, confined themselves to their homes and would not even dare to speak to their elder brothers and cousins. They would cover their head with their saree-ends and avoid appearing before elderly men. But all the girls of our family received some education at home. My elder sisters and cousins learnt the Bengali alphabet and could read the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat* in Bengali. Girls used to sing wailing songs at the time of their marriage.

People of the village left their beds on hearing the sound of the husking paddle in the houses of *keutas* (corn-chandlers). When they came out, they would come across the smith's forge, and the sound of the hammer hitting a burning red sickle or plough would greet them. One would also see a carpenter busy at work, the village barber carrying his tools of trade and school children on their way to the *chatsali*. Farmers went to plough their fields. The cowherd boy drove the cattle. The washerwoman would start washing clothes. Like montage in a film all these scenes flash across my mind.

Evenings were no less beautiful. The cattle returned to their sheds in the soft and mellow light of dusk. Lamps were lit before the sacred *tulsi* plants. The entire village resounded with the peals of the temple bell. On some evenings, disputes were settled at the Bhagabat *ghar* in the village.

Night descended on the village. Everything became quiet and still. When we woke up in the middle of the night, from the nearby orchard came cries of jackals, and the call of the village chowkidar. The whistle of train crossing the bridge over the river Kathajodi would also carry into our village.

During winter, groups of tattooing *kelunis* came to our village. At midday, when the menfolk were away at work, they would tattoo the arms of women. And during summer, snake charmers from Patia visited the village and displayed their tricks.

Those days, a rupee was divided into sixteen annas, and an anna into four paise. One paisa was further sub-divided into three *pahulas* and four *chhadams*. Eight annas made a half

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

rupee, and four annas, one fourth of a rupee. A *pahula* coin was smaller in size than a paise coin, and a two paise coin was somewhat larger. Probably there was no coin called *chhadam*, it was only a unit useful for purposes of calculation. There was no one-rupee currency note. Only silver coins, carrying the impression of the head of the British King or Queen on one side, were in circulation. Some of the coins carried an impression of the head of Queen Victoria, others that of either King Edward VII or King George V. A one-rupee coin weighed one *tola*. 105 tolas made a Cuttacki seer and 80 tolas a Balasori seer.

The outbreak of epidemics such as cholera and smallpox in the villages was common those days. When cholera broke out, offerings were made to goddess Mangala. At times strange and fantastic rumours would spread: "Such and such goddess has visited the village, etc." The goddess would possess one of the villagers and speak through him. This person, who was called *Kalisi*, would get into a trance and dance, twigs and branches in hand, and make strange and ominous forecasts: "I won't leave without taking with me ten or fifteen heads," etc. The Villagers worshipped her, beating gongs and cymbals and offered her *panaa*, a kind of sweet cold drink. The *Kalisi* was appeased in this manner. The superstition and ignorance of the people went even further than this. When the health workers came to the village to vaccinate people against an epidemic, children got terribly scared and hid themselves inside their houses. Mothers would turn the health workers away saying that there were no children inside.

The postman from Biribati post office used to visit our village on a specific day in a week. He would read letters, and messages in money order forms to illiterate persons and get a little money for his services.

Now and then the village would receive an important visitor, who was treated with more respect than was accorded to ordinary guests. Such a person would stay in the house of a chosen few. The village elders came to see him. Special cooking arrangements would be made for him. These visitors came

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

from Jhankad area. They would whisper *guru mantra* or the *mantra* of initiation to children. Like the sacred thread ceremony of Brahmins, this was a ritual for Vaishnavas. A sheet of cloth was spread over the heads of the guru or teacher and the *sishyas* or the disciple. The *guru* would breathe the sacred *mantras* into the ears of the sishya. I was given this *mantra* when I was a child. I even could not hear the *mantra* properly, nor could I make sense of it. Later I learnt that the sacred *mantra* was a hymn to Lord Vishnu.

Probably due to the influence of a Vaishnava sect, Utkaliya or Goudiya, one of our forefathers had become a Vaishnava, discarded his surname 'Munshi', and had adopted the surname 'Das'. Since then we came to be known as Das.

Some childhood memories have left an indelible impression in my mind. One of those was the story of two friends, Natabar and Gadadhar. Natabar uncle was looking after our landed property in the village and owned a very small share in our Jharkata zamindari. Natabar uncle collected the revenue and deposited it in the government treasury. At the time of land settlement, he worked temporarily in the settlement office and commuted to Cuttack every day. Gangadhar Das was my uncle's age and his close friend. Every year, before *Sunia*, some revenue was collected from the people of Jharkata. Sometimes uncle entrusted Gangadhar with the task of revenue collection. One day, when Gangadhar was explaining the accounts to uncle, the latter asked him:

"Have you collected revenue from Damei Padhan?"

"Yes."

"But last year I had collected from him the revenue for three years at a time."

"And this year I collected four years' revenue from him, the arrears and the current dues taken together."

Natabar uncle was a little perturbed. He said, "Have you given him a receipt?"

Gangadhar had nothing to hide from his friend. He smiled and promptly replied, "No, I have given him only a note on a piece of paper."

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Uncle was astonished. He said, "What note? What have you written in it?"

In order to show his ability to collect extra three years' revenue from an illiterate farmer, Gangadhar said, "I have written... we write this... for that purpose... Collected the revenue and give you the receipt... your name has not been entered in the register."

Gangadhar laughed, pleased with his own cleverness. "Don't worry, it is my job to collect the revenue." The matter ended there. I don't know if Gangadhar went to the poor farmer to collect revenue in the same manner the following year. But, suppose the farmer had asked Gangadhar, "Can you swear by touching the soil of Bainkolisha *danda*, that I haven't given you the revenue arrears?" The latter, without the least hesitation, would have replied, "Of course you did." There was a reason why even a person like Gangadhar would have felt obliged to make such a confession.

There was a large open space named Bainkolisha *danda* to the north of village Bentakar. There was a legend about this place. It was said that, long ago, a rich moneylender named Bainkoli Sahu lived here. He owned a lot of landed property and lived in a big house, the door of which was made of bronze. When the door was shut at night, the whole neighbourhood would ring with the sound. By means, fair and foul, he had amassed a vast wealth, by lending money to the poor and the needy, charging a high rate of interest. However, in course of time, the wealth thus piled up came to be squandered in the end. Sahu was issueless when he breathed his last. Others grabbed his property. There is a saying that wealth earned through foul means soon melts away. So it happened in this case. The land on which once stood the moneylender's big house now lay abandoned. It came to be known as Baikolisha danda, the homestead land with no heir to lay claim to it. In course of time it became the symbol of a curse: if one adopted unjust means, no one in his family would live to continue the family line. This belief took firm roots in people's mind. As witnesses swear by the holy scriptures while taking an oath in

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

a court of law, the people of all neighbouring villages used to touch the soil of Bainkolisha *danda* before making a statement. They were afraid of telling a lie once they touched it.

However, all this does not mean that people of those days were truthful. Truth and lies went hand in hand. Deceit was a part of life. At times, proper receipts were not issued at the time of revenue collection. In spite of all these, people did recognize the difference between justice and injustice, truth and untruth. They were a little more scared of telling a lie of deviating from the path of virtue. No one dared tell a lie for a petty gain. Other tales about Bainkolisha *danda* were also current. But all these played on the same fear: if one did something unjust or told a lie, he would have no one left to inherit his property. Probably, for this reason Gangadhar Das would not have dared to mouth the lie that he had not collected revenue from that illiterate farmer.

Before I left for Cuttack to pursue my studies, a minor incident had touched my heart deeply. It remains especially in my memory and has continued to enchant me, to cast its spell on me all my life.

I recorded this incident in a piece entitled, "Why I Write," which I wrote at the request of a young friend:

It happened when I was aged seven or eight. I was then staying in the village. That year, a play was staged in the Dolamandap field. I was sitting in the front row in the company of my friends. A makeshift pandal had been raised, and it had been enclosed on three sides by curtains, and a drop scene hung in the front. A few petromax lights lighted the stage. I was looking at the stage, fascinated, without batting an eyelid. What lay inside? What lay beyond the curtains? What was a theatre? What would happen there? I wondered. When thoughts crowded my mind, the drop curtain rose. The characters appeared on the pandal. Oh, how gorgeous they looked! Their faces and bodies looked pink, their palms red. They wore brocaded costume. It seemed as if they descended from the skies. I forgot myself for while, longed to be one of them, become a part of their magical world. What a thrill!

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

The mark it left on my subconscious self drew me towards the world of theatre. In time, the seed planted in my mind sprouted and grew. The thrill of the moment burst the shell of the subconscious and became transformed into a creative instinct, held me in its grip all my life. From that day, I have kept running after a musk deer called theatre. Like a tired racehorse returning to the stable after taking part in a race, I have taken shelter in the cool shade of my home, 'Pathachhaya', a number of times. Regaining breath, I have started my journey, my search again. Writing for the stage and staging a play were two sides of the same coin. I did not know when the search would come to an end.

Budhi Thakurani lane in Cuttack is not very far from Patana village. Only eight to ten miles separated the two places. River Kathajodi flows between them. But it seemed to me as if I had been sent to some far-off place. A feeling of loneliness came over me. Everything seemed new, alien. At times, I would think of home and start crying. My uncle or cousin would then take me to the village on a bicycle on a Saturday and bring me back to Cuttack on the following Monday. On other holidays, my mother sent Agana to take me to the village. In spite of all these arrangements, I failed to like Cuttack at the beginning. The dusty roads, lanes and by-lanes of Cuttack and its dirty lavatories put me off. However, gradually I got used to the change of scene, the shift from village to town. During the four years I spent at Ravenshaw Collegiate School, I became accustomed to life in Cuttack. Soon I grew to like many things about the town : its fifty-two bazars and fifty-three lanes, its white-painted buildings, the *baras*, *piazis* and *gulgulas* of the shop in Mehendipir, the *malpua* of the sweet vendor of Budhi Thakurani lane and the sponge *rasogollas* of Gopal Sahu's shop near the law-court.

In the evenings, a man wearing a half-pant and a vest, a ladder on his shoulder, and a kerosene tin in hand, would go from one lamp-post to another. He would climb the ladder, clean the glass shade, fill the lamp with kerosene oil and light it before moving on to another post. When one woke up at

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

night, one would hear the drowsy voice of an old man crying, *rabidi lachheda*. The opium-eaters and those who took other intoxicants would wait for him, behind a betel shop or in some *akhadaghar*. The old man earned some money at night selling *rabidi* and *khuapeda* to these addicts, who liked the taste of these sweets. On moonlit nights in summer children played the game of hide-and-seek in the lanes. In course of time, I came to like coconut shies on Chitau Amavasya, kite-flying on Makar Sankranti, tiger dance during Muharrum and the colourful festivities during Dussehera.

Although I had grown fond of Cuttack in many ways, I still felt lonely at times. I went to school all by myself. I had no friends outside school. I played only during the recess, and with classmates. When classes were over, I returned to our residence, all alone.

I remember an incident, which took place in 1933 or may be, early in 1934. One day we noticed that the road between our school and the court had been swept clean. We were told that Mr Das would come to a meeting at the Commissioner's office the next day. Orissa would become a separate province. Madhusudan Das, popularly called Madhu Barrister, was a legendary figure. Children used to sing, "I shall study, and fight Madhu barrister in the court." The next morning, we stood on the compound wall of the school to catch a glimpse of the great man. Vast crowds of people lined both sides of the road. The air resounded with slogans, "Bande Mataram" and "Bande Utkal Janani."

Mr Das's car rolled into view. The symbol of Oriyas' pride, dressed in a long black coat, was sitting in the back seat. He wore a white headgear. He saluted the crowd. This uncrowned emperor of the Oriyas had called upon the people of Orissa to

Light the flame of love for the nation
Sacrifice your selfish interests
And dance around the yajna of self-sacrifice together.

The scene was unfogettable. It thrilled and inspired me.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

I rarely met my father when I was child. He would come home occasionally and return to Kujang after spending only a few days. When I was a student of Ravenshaw Collegiate School, I used to come to my village for a couple of days when father was home. There would be a festive atmosphere. Occasionally the Mahant of Gada Kujang *math*, Bhagabat Das, accompanied my father. The lean and soft-spoken *Mahant* kept himself busy doing *puja* for long time. He wore holy marks made of sandal paste on his forehead and arms. He was served fine rice, ghee, curries and a variety of fried vegetables, in a very large plate. The meal was rounded off with a pot of milk. He offered the food to Lord Raghunath, kept a part of each item in another plate for others, and helped himself to the rest. He was not a highly educated man; but he had clear ideas about right and wrong. The villagers came to meet him in the evening and discussed matters spiritual with him.

We held feasts whenever my father came home. A few others from the village, chief among whom were Radhu uncle and Daya uncle, were invited to these.

Daya uncle was special. He was a Brahmin by caste and a reformist. He was the son of the renowned pundit, Krushna Chandra Acharya, the author of *Purohita Sarbaswa*, a book of rituals.

Brahmins found this book useful for performing priestly chores. Daya uncle also worked as a *kaviraj*, a practitioner of the traditional system of medicine. A large signboard on a shop at Nimchouri square in Cuttack announced his name: Kaviraj Dayanidhi Acharya. He had other sources of income, too. He very often would beat in the court and collectorate premises to offer advice to parties on lawsuits. His dress and manners made him stand out from the crowd. He put on a dhoti, a white shirt and a black open-breast coat, stockings and black full shoes. On his head he put on a sola topee, and he carried a large leather bag.

Daya uncle was very close to Banambar uncle and they addressed each other *chanda*. Those days, friends who felt very close to each other, used to call each other *abhada, sangata, baula,*

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

labanga or *chanda*. We had a good feast every time Daya uncle visited our house. My mother cooked rice, dal, etc., but mutton curry was prepared on the verandah by my father, Banamber uncle, Daya uncle and other men. After meat was bought, my father used to ask Banamber uncle, "How much have you brought?" He reminded him that Daya uncle was very fond of meat. He would like to taste a piece, when meat was being fried. On occasions, more than a seer of meat would find its way to his stomach in this manner. Moreover, he would also have his share when he and the others sat down to eat. His huge appetite brought us more fun than the feast itself.

Once my father had come home. He was unhappy with me, because I had not done well at my studies. My mother tried to defend me, saying that proper care had not been taken of me. Father, for his part, tried to prove that she was mistaken. Finally, mother told him, "No, he'll no longer study in Cuttack. This time you must take him with you to Kujang. The high school is quite close to your residence there." My mother had received little education. She had only learnt the alphabets. But once she made up her mind about something, she would never budge. She had her way that day. I left for Kujang with my father. It was decided that I would be admitted to Banabihari High School there.

When I was in Cuttack, I was feeling unhappy. It seemed that my wings had been trussed up. Suddenly they were made free, just when I was beginning to enjoy the limited freedom of a bird whose wings had been tied up. We traveled from Cuttack to Tarapur by bus and from there to Kujang by a covered bullock cart, sitting on a reed-mat spread out on bundles of straw. We got into the cart in the evening and travelling all night, we reached Kujang at dawn. Far away, the sun was rising over the Bay of Bengal. Kujang brought me the excitement of first love. I deeply fell in love with the place. I had the taste of freedom under its clear sky. My creative self blossomed here freely, without my becoming aware of it.

Kujang was the theatre on which many scenes of my life were played out. It was here that I passed from childhood to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

adolescence, from adolescence to youth and from youth to the midday of life. It was here that I discovered the man's capacity for deceit and hypocrisy, his pettiness. Here also I came to reach a full understanding of life and society. This was where I had felt the mystery and nobility of nature. After twenty-five years of my stay here, I left Kujang, my second home, in 1960, as a victim of treachery. After that I have never enjoyed the clear sunrise in the sky of Kujang. I have writhed in pain and anguish, like a wounded snake, but my love for Kujang has never grown less fervent.

The two-toned water of the river swelling with the tide from the sea, the virgin beach stretching endlessly, the mangrove forest, mounds of *khanga*, *hilsa* and *bhekta* fish caught at the mouth of the river Mahanadi, hundreds of small boats moored on the banks of the fishing villages, betel vines raised on sands in villages by the sea—all these have become living memories. They found expression, whenever an opportunity came their way.

These memories animate the words of the two young *paikas*, Kalia and Panchua, during their beats at the Bidanasi fort in the play, *Nandika Keshari*. When Nandika, the daughter of King Subarna Keshari, asks them who they are, they sing:

Kalia : In deep forest the tiger roars
And the boat floats on the river
I lie in wait for shoals of *hilsa*
In the still waters of the tide
Kaliapata is my village
And my name is Kalia Nahaka
I am a robust young man of my village
I see Bidanasi Fort for the first time
And my eyes are dazzed.

Panchua : Near village Nuabalitutha
On the other side of the river
Is my village.
I'm my mother's pet.
My father named me Panchua Padhana

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

I plant *inkar* sticks to train the betel creepers
I keep watch over *ragi* fields at night
And till my land by day.

As soon as we reached Kujang, my father got me admitted to class-VII in the high school there. Since I was not good at studies, I had to continue in class-VII for one more year.

Students from many places of Cuttack district pursued their studies at Kujang. Carefully chosen, qualified teachers taught there. Keshabeswar Bose from Calcutta was our headmaster. We, the students, were proud of him, because he had received an MA in English from Leeds University.

The Kujang estate was larger than many feudatory states of Orissa. Since the estate had passed into the hands of the Maharaja of Bardhaman as a result of the infamous 'Permanent Settlement' during British rule, its position was somewhat different from the other estates. The Maharaja of Bardhaman was an absentee landlord. He was an enlightened ruler and the people of Kujang were therefore, not subjected to tyranny.

The administrative headquarters of the Kujang estate was situated at Bardhaman. So the prefix 'sub' was added to the designations of all the officials stationed at Kujang: they were Sub-manager, Sub-Overseer, etc. Kujang was discriminated in this manner. However, Keshabeswar Bose was the headmaster and not the Sub-headmaster of the school, because it was under the administrative control of the education department.

The headmaster was the centre of the educational and cultural life of Kujang. He used to wear clothes befitting every occasion. At the time of morning walks, he put on a khaki short, a white shirt, a white coat, and shoes and carried a walking stick fitted with a knob. He would arrive at the school sharp at 10.30 AM, dressed in suit and tie. In the afternoon, he would appear in a loose pant, *punjabi* and chappals to supervise the games of students, leaning against his walking stick. When he came out in the evening, he put on a felt hat. He

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

wore a bow tie when he came to dinner. On social occasions, he would appear in a white *dhoti* and a silk *punjabi*, the colour of champak flower. He spoke fluent English and Oriya with a strong Bengali accent. He often smoked a pipe. He wrote with a Parker pen and used violet ink.

Mr Bose was the headmaster of the school till I was a student of class-X. Since Mrs Bose served as a lecturer in Bethune College, Calcutta, Mr Bose left for Calcutta to serve as a lecturer in City College.

After many years, in 1953, I went to the City College to see Mr Bose. Those days the film *Amari Gaan Jhua* was being shot in Eastern Talkies at Dakshineswar. Mr Bose had not changed; he had only lost his earlier vigour. Mrs Bose was no more. She was murdered by her cook in their Park Street residence. They had no children.

I passed Matriculation from Kujang High School. Usually people leave villages and go to towns for building their career. But fate took me from Cuttack to a moffusil area, Kujang. Perhaps destiny held different things in store for me.

Bamadev Mishra taught us grammar. Not only among students and teachers, but also among the people of the locality, he had earned a name for himself as a teacher of vernacular. A few of his books had been published by that time. He was short, and he put on a khaddar dhoti and *punjabi*. He was fair-complexioned and handsome, and he was soft-spoken. He loved his students, and we admired his style of teaching.

Mayadhar Mohanty and Mathurananda Behera were among my classmates. They came to school from the other side of the Taladanda bridge and had to cover three to four miles by foot. Mayadhar came from Mallasahi, which was located to the south of the canal, and Mathura from the village Tikhiri, which lay to the north of the canal. Both of them were usually late for their classes.

The teacher-student relationship was more cordial at Kujang than at Cuttack. One day, Mathura did not come to school and Bamadev Mishra wanted to find out if he was ill.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

At that time, he could hear the footsteps of someone coming in that direction. The headmaster entered the classroom, followed by a peon, Jagabandhu in khaki dress. The students stood up. The headmaster motioned them to take their seats. He asked Bamadev babu, in Bengali, "Who is Arta babu's son?" I had met him in his room only once, for a few minutes, on the day of my admission. Before Bamadev babu could say anything, the headmaster's eyes rested on me. I was sitting in a middle row.

"You! Come here."

Terror struck, I approached him. The headmaster looked at me through his glasses in a black frame.

"Good. The boy is smart."

I used to go to Kujang High School wearing the same dress which I used to wear while studying at Ravenshaw Collegiate School: khaki shorts, white shirt and black full shoes bought from Bhim babu's shoe store at Nimchoudi. I seemed smart to the headmaster, because most of the students came to school in *dhoti,* and barefooted. But my feeling of elation did not last long. He told me, "Listen, your father told me, you did not do well in your studies at Cuttack. Do you know, Bamadev babu, for this reason, Arta babu has brought this boy here." Bamadev babu nodded. The headmaster continued, "You must change your ways here. You have to study seriously and attentively. Do you understand?"

What could I say? I felt shy. I only nodded my head and muttered, "Yes Sir." Perhaps the headmaster had come to the class only for this reason. Soon afterwards he left, followed by Jagabandhu.

I passed Matriculation from Kujang High School in 1940. Patna University then conducted the examinations. Of course, I was placed in the higher second division, but I was aware of the fact that I had not followed the headmaster's advice. I had failed in the class examinations once, in class X.

I had no regrets that I could not do well in my examinations, for the days I spent at Kujang High School had expanded my mental horizon.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

My mother stayed for a few months in our village after. I left for Kujang to study there. Something unthinkable happened during this period. It was the month of Baisakh. Even the nights were hot. In the unbearable heat, my mother came out of her bedroom and sat on the verandah till late in the night. Her thoughts were full of me, for she had sent me to such a far-off place for the first time. She wondered what I ate there and how I got on. Suddenly her eyes fell on the Bhagabat room on the other side of the courtyard. In the semi-darkness there appeared a figure in white. The shadowy shape advanced towards the east. She said, "Who? Who is there?" and followed the shadow to the kitchen, which was the abode of our dead ancestors. There the shadow melted away.

The next morning my mother told the story to everyone in the family. She was always apprehensive that something bad might happen to me. But did anything really happen to me? Certainly, and that was really astonishing.

Almost at the same moment when this incident took place in the dark in Patana village, I was suffering from high fever and was almost in a state of delirium, crying, "Mother, Mother." Two hurricane lamps were burning there. My father was sitting beside me, deeply worried and scared. Dr Tarapada Dutta, LMP, of Kujang dispensary, was treating me. He said to my father in Bengali, "Artababu, put a piece of cloth soaked in water over his forehead. I'm sure, it is malaria. I shall send other medicines in the morning." He left, carrying a hurricane lamp.

The temperature began to come down in the morning. I opened my eyes. My father said, "I shall send a telegram to Nagu as soon as the Post Office opens. Somebody should be brought here." "Somebody" meant my mother, or my aunt. Nagu alias Nagu uncle was my maternal uncle. His house was at Biribati. Those days, our Post Office was located at Biribati. A Postman came to our village only once a week. To avoid delay, letters and telegrams normally came to my uncle. He sent these to our house immediately.

The morning following the night on which my mother

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

noticed the shadowy figure she felt very uncomfortable. She sat near the well all day long, fretting. It was dark when Nagu uncle alias Raghunath Mohanty, my mother's younger brother, arrived. He carried a telegram sent by father. "Babu is ill, one of you should come here."

Later, when I heard this story from my mother, a question rose in my mind: it is only accidental that when I was suffering from fever at Kujang, my mother had a glimpse of this ominous shadowy figure? Is there really something called telepathy? I never tried to ascertain whether telepathy had a scientific basis, but later in life I wrote a play, *Urmi*, based on the experience of telepathy, linking the experiences of two persons staying far apart.

The protagonist of the play was Debakanta Malhotra. He had to spend a night in the company of a young lady named Alakananda in a lonely compartment. In the stillness of the night, both of them got close to each other. Both of them felt that their two souls came together. However, it was only a temporary experience. In the morning, Debakanta discovered a letter from Alakananda lying on his berth, "I must have left the train by the time you get up. Please do not misunderstand me. Believe me, I did not tell you a lie. The two souls met here only accidentally. We'll come together in our next birth. I shall wait for you. I would have been happy if I could have accepted your request. But I lacked the courage. Would you have been happy if you had married a widow? You know my address. But please do not write to me. My life is full of pain. I do not know if God exists. If He does, I pray to Him to put an early end to my life. Believe me, in my last days, I shall think of you. If it is possible, if you can wait for me and if my love for you is genuine, do come to me that day. We shall meet for the last time in this life. I do not know where you will be... and how you will come to me... and yet I believe, some strange power will pull you to me."

In honour of the memory of Alakananda, Debakanta chooses to remain celibate all his life. He could never forget the inexpressible pain and anguish of his failure to come close

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

to the person he loved, and like a joker in a circus, concealed his pain in laughter and gaiety. After many years he had a feeling that Alakananda was in trouble. He had work in Delhi... he was to go with his friends to Mathura and Brindaban the next morning. But before day broke, he came to Nishikanta Das and expressed his inability to accompany his friends. He expressed to him the deep anguish of his heart.

Debakanta : I'm sure, Das, that moment has arrived. Alakananda is in trouble. She is thinking of me. She is anxious to see me.

Nishikanta : Dabakanta, probably because of the long wait, your mind and body have made you emotional. Nothing has happened to Alakananda. It is impossible that she is thinking of you at this very moment. You are feeling restless for no good reason.

Debakanta : No, Das, I'm sure, Alaka is in trouble. She is thinking of me. I can't stay here in Delhi even for a moment. I'm sorry, I can't accompany you to Mathura and Brindaban; I can't get an image of Goddess Radha for my mother. Nor can I get some clay from the garden in Brindaban. I'm leaving Delhi by the morning flight. Her house is quite a distance even by taxi. Please convey my apologies to my friends.

Debakanta caught the flight the next morning. He reached Alakananda. She had met with a motor accident and was fighting with death. And she was thinking of Debakanta.

Many such incidents and memories crowded my writings. This incident in my play, *Urmi* is just an example.

One may or may not believe in telepathy, but will anyone believe that quinine tablet can be given to a patient suffering from fever prior to smallpox?

I was unlucky. The tablets, which Dr Tarapada Dutta sent to me the next morning, were quinine tablets. My whole body

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was covered with pustules of smallpox. The body was poisoned. For about a month I had to lie on the bed, struggling for life.

Later, smallpox was eradicated from the country by vaccinating people against it. It is now difficult to imagine how terrible the disease was. There was no cure for smallpox those days. The pustules disappeared after about nine days. But the pockmarks remained on my face for many days. A bed made of ashes was prepared for me. It was covered by a sheet of cloth, on which were spread banana leaves. I was made to sleep on these. For several days I lay unconscious. When I gained consciousness I could not change sides. Someone or the other would sit by my bedside and fan me with twigs of neem leaves.

Every morning Keshabeswar Bose, our headmaster would come to see me. He said to my father, "Do you know Arta babu, in Bengal, if someone suffers from smallpox we give him donkey's milk and *kalam* leaves. You give the same things to your son. The pain will subside; he will recover soon." *Kalam* leaves grew in many ponds in the village. But my father had a hard time of getting donkey's milk. He came to know that there was a milch donkey near the washerman's ghat in a village. Donkey's milk could be procured for a few days. I had to drink it along with the juice of *kalam* leaves.

Our headmaster not only loved his students; he was a dedicated teacher. Besides teaching, his, aim was to create an interest in students in learning. For the growth of the students mind, he introduced a novel method of teaching even in a place like Kujang. Every morning, under his sharp observation, the reading room was kept open. Spending some time in the reading room was compulsory for the students living in the hostel and in the nearby villages. Newspapers, both in Oriya and in English, were available there. Students read magazines such as *Jahnamamu, Sahakar, Nababharat* there. I had grown familiar with the works of Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Sachidananda Routray, Biswanath Kar, Ratnakar Pati, Bipin Bihari Ray and many others before I passed Matriculation.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Bose's motto was, "Catch them young." Our headmaster had provided us with an opportunity, through the library and reading room, to read other books besides our textbooks. This aroused in me a keen desire to read more books. The interest in reading books deepened into a habit. Books other than my text books interested me more. As a result of neglecting the prescribed texts, I failed in class X. But I had gone through many books during my school days. Among the books in our school library, I liked the English translation of the books of Jules Verne the most. It began with the title, *Around the World in Eighty Days*. I also read the French novelist Romain Rolland's long novel, *Jean Christophe*. Although I could not completely grasp the theme and the language of these books, I was glad that I could get through so many of them. This habit continued even after I was admitted to Ravenshaw College, Cuttack.

In the early days of my college life, I came across Surendra Mohanty, whom I liked a lot. In him I found a great friend. Mohanty, who later because a famous Oriya novelist, was one year senior to me. I do not remember when and where I first met him. But a few days after taking admission in the college, I got close to him. On many occasions we gossiped at Bachu bhai's shop. Together we would visit Wheeler's bookstall in the railway station; we discussed all kinds of things, important as well as trivial. His way of talking was unique and he was possessed of a sharp intelligence. There was something special about his manners, conversation and arguments. His being different from others, his keen intelligence and the warmth of his friendship drew me towards him.

Although my heart overflowed with powerful feelings and although I had developed a deep love for literature, I had not seriously started writing yet. I wrote only casually. But I wanted to write a lot. That was also the beginning of Sura babu's writing career.

One day, while smoking a cigarette in front of Kusha's tobacco shop, Sura babu said to me, "It is necessary to read books in a systematic way."

Dama babu was our college librarian those days. A stu-

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

dent could take only one book at a time. Occasionally, I got a book issued in my name, but I would lose my way in Kanika library, which seemed like a jungle to me. I could not form any idea about the books by seeing only the titles. I could not decide which book to read. I was glad when Sura babu suggested that we should read books systematically.

After a few days, another idea crossed his mind. He said, "We should also see some important places like the caves of Khandagiri and Udaygiri, What do you say, Manu babu?" We decide to go there. A few days later, we started our journey by the night train. We got down at Bhubaneswar. Kerosene lamps lighted the old railway station. We tried to find out how far the caves were from the station, and how long it would take to reach there. The owner of a bullock cart pulled by a single bullock came rushing. The fare was settled: a rupee or a rupee and a half I don't exactly remember. We sat on the dirty mat spread out on a bed of straw in the cart and proceeded to Khandagiri-Udaygiri. We spent the whole day visiting the caves. We sat in the semi-dark caves for quite sometime. We had a lunch of puffed rice and coconut chips. We also sat in the open-air theatre in front of the two-storeyed building of Udaygiri, which belonged to the 2nd century B.C. Here, the art lovers of Kalinga watched performances on the stage during the reign of Emperor Kharavela. We dreamt of the future. Sura babu was much ahead of me. He was like a centre forward in a game of football. He talked non-stop; he was in form. He explained to me the difference between the poetic vision of Shelley and that of Keats. He also explained to me how important reading the novels of Thomas Hardy was. At times, he would also speak a word or two about the poetry of Mayadhar Mansingh, "His poetry, excellent, incomparable.

Under this mango tree
The hands of my beloved
Circled my neck in a deep embrace
Like a bangle around a woman's wrist.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Ah! There are no good journals in Orissa !" We had a long chat. We discussed many things: the expression of youth, our dreams about the future.

Sura babu had not thought of joining politics then. That the British rulers were responsible for the Naanka famine of 1866, that it would be better if the British left India, and that Fakir Mohan Senapati saved the Oriya language—these views he expressed with passion. He smoked one cigarette after another. He would say, "Manu babu, what would happen, if we start a secret organisation like the one in Bengal which spearheaded the anarchist movement?" In the evening, we returned to Cuttack.

Our plans to start systematic study of literature took a concrete shape. Sura babu was a favourite student of Professor P.S. Sundaram, the head of the English Department. Sura babu did not attend classes regularly. It was difficult on his part to secure the necessary, minimum percentage of attendance. In spite of this, Professor Sundaram could recognise in him a highly talented person. One day, when the Professor was relaxing in a chair in his room, his legs on the table, Sura babu brought me there and introduced me to him, saying, "Sir, he is interested in plays. As for me, I am interested in fiction. Both of us want to be exposed to world literature." Although Professor Sundaram took a class with us once a week, he did not know me personally. And that was the first time I was introduced to him. He asked me a couple of questions, "Which English plays have you read? What other plays do you want to read?" etc.

Then, he said in a calm voice, "Surendranath, meet me after a week." We paid our respect to him, and left.

Sura babu brought two lists from him after a week. A list of about thirty plays by different playwrights was for me, and another of novels was meant for Sura babu. The list was prepared in such a way that the reader's interest would deepen as he reads the plays in that order: he would begin with simpler texts and gradually move on to more complex ones. The list began with problem plays by John Galsworthy : *Strife, The*

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Mob and *Justice*. In the middle, there were the plays by the American playwright, Eugene O'Neil: *Marco Million* and *Ah Wilderness*. And finally, *The Blue Bird*, a play by the Belgian playwright, Maurice Maetrelink. I had read most of these plays during my college days.

My reading of the plays certainly inspired me to write plays. But the seeds of my interest in plays were planted in my mind during my student days in Kujang High School.

The same Keshabeswar Bose, whom we feared as we feared a tiger, made arrangements for cultural programmes on the occasion of Ganesh Puja and Saraswati puja. All the officials of Kujang estate were invited to the school. Programmes were held in the evening, before the feast. A few poems were recited and songs were sung. Selected scenes from a couple of plays were staged. I always acted in these plays. The thrill I had felt while watching a play in Patana village grew in intense when I acted on the stage. I was drawn towards plays after reading a few and acting in a few. Whenever I got a chance of acting in a play outside the school, I never failed to seize it.

The desire to act in a stage-play had cast its spell on me by the time I appeared at the Matriculation examination. I had a friend in Kujang, who was a couple of years older than I. His name was Haricharan, he was the son of Durgacharan Das, the pharmacist of Kujang dispensary. At the time he was staying with his father, after sitting for the final examination of the Medical School. Both of us were waiting for our results. Hari babu used to take part in the plays staged by the Medical School. He had also come under the spell of theatre. Both of us decided to stage plays.

We set to work. A script had to be chosen and actors had to be selected. People had to be persuaded to act in female roles, for, at the time, women had not yet appeared on the stage. The organisers moved from door to door, collecting subscriptions. The parts of individual actors were to be copied and supplied to them. A club was established, and all these were organised under the auspices of a club called Friend's Club.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Out of several plays, two were selected. One of these was *Konark* by Aswini Kumar Ghosh. The other was *Babur*, the translation of a Bengali play. We had selected *Konark*, because we had decided that Hari babu would play the role of Bishu Maharana and myself that of Dharama. Both of us were fit for the respective roles. The argument behind the choice of *Babur* was that it had already been staged in the Medical School and Hari babu had acted in it. He had some idea about how to direct the play. It was decided that Hari babu would play the role of Babur, and I would take up another important role.

I worked very hard for staging these two plays. I put in my efforts in almost all the departments—direction, stagecraft and acting. In fact, this was my first direct involvement with the stage.

The responsibility we took up was like that of a production of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. A raised platform had been prepared by piling earth. A pit was dug to set out chairs for the audience. A large crowd gathered there in the evening. Rows of chairs and benches had been laid out for the invited guests. Bira Kishore Roy, an eminent lawyer, had occupied a chair in the front row. Later, Roy become the first Oriya Advocate-General and the first Oriya Chief Justice of the High Court. His wife, Latika Sundari Ray was a niece of the Patnaik family of Balarampur near Kujang. So he had a close relationship with Kujang. A few mats had been spread on a raised platform behind the chairs. Local people sat on those mats. Many others, carrying hurricane lamps sat on the ground.

When we staged our performances in 1940, there was no electricity in moffusil villages and small towns. Even a few places in Cuttack went without electricity. Microphones had not been used on stage and actors had to deliver their dialogues loudly in order to be audible to those members of the audience sitting in the back rows.

We staged two plays in two consecutive nights. On the first night, *Konark* was staged. After putting on make-up, I was waiting in the makeshift green room to play the role of Dharama. The third bell rang. The drop scene rose, a concert

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was performed and it was followed by a solo dance in the mode of the Baiji dances organised in the houses of landlords. After the dance was over, the play started, to the cheers of the huge crowd. A member of the audience came to the stage to present a medal to the actor of his choice after a scene or an act was over. The chief guest, Roy had announced a gold medal for me for playing the role of Dharama.

Out of a number of medals I received that night, one silver medal was something special. I was adjusting the scarf on my shoulder in the green room before going on to the stage. In that scene, Dharama had to go and meet Bishu Maharana. At that moment Kebal babu who was managing the stage came rushing to me and said, "Babu, come on the stage. There is yet another medal for you." I accompanied him to the stage. To the cheers of the crowd, my father emerged from the audience. I could not guess why my father was coming to the stage. He came and stood beside me and brought out a silver medal from his pocket. He fixed the medal on my scarf with a safety pin. The auditorium resounded with the applause of the crowd. My father returned to his seat in the audience. And thus he watered the plant of my love for acting. Perhaps my father, stage and myself were connected with an invisible thread before my coming to Kujang.

When I was a student of Ravenshaw Collegiate School, I once went to Kujang with Banambar uncle to see the celebration of the Sunia festival there. The officials had staged *Banabir*, a play translated from Bengali. My father and his friend, Dibakar babu took part in the production of the play.

Sunia was the most important festival of Kujang those days. It was celebrated in the estate with great pomp every year. Feasts were held for two consecutive days. On the first day officials, guests and school students were invited. The general public were entertained on the second. Venison was the chief attraction in the feast. The Sub-Manager of Kujang, as the representative of the Maharaja of Bardhaman, was led to the Sunia altar in a procession amid the blowing of conch shells, and beating of gongs and drums. There he performed

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the ritual of cutting a piece of gold. Then he went to the Treasury and deposited a piece of gold there. A dance or a play was performed in the night. When the play, *Banabir*, was staged on the occasion of Sunia, I had got an opportunity to go behind the screen. That day I knew what the green room was. Since my uncle was a police officer, he was given special attention and was escorted into the room. I also accompanied him. In the past, I went with him several times to watch Mohan Sundar Goswami's Rasa plays performed on the stage at Jagannath Ballav near our residence in Budhi Thakurani lane. But this was the first time I got to have a glimpse of the interior of a stage and the inside of a green room. The play had not yet started, when we came in. My father had already put on the make-up. A few others were taking turns to put on their make-up. I eagerly looked around. Boys playing female roles were wearing sarees. They wore long sleeved blouses on false breasts made of cotton wool. Standing before a mirror someone was putting on a wig having plaits. While one was applying powder on his face, another was putting on a false beard and moustache. A man, perhaps the Director of the play, was overseeing the activities, a whistle around his neck. The goings-on behind the screen fascinated me.

Although I took part in plays my father was never angry with me. In fact, he was secretly pleased at my going on the stage. Only once, when I was in college, he cautioned me against the dangers of getting drawn into the world of acting. This was at the time of the rehearsal of my play *Yauban*, which was staged at Annapurna Theatre in 1944. Those days, I stayed at the Minerva Mess, which was situated in the lane in front of Ravenshaw College. I was in the final year of B.A. then. I used to go to Annapurna Theatre regularly to be present at the rehearsal of the play, *Yauban*. I also used to smoke a lot at the time. My father came to know about all this. He was happy that my play was going to be staged at Annapurna. But he called me over and said, "It is good you are doing this, but remember, a young man should not slip nor sleep."

If Cuttack had been renamed after independence, it might

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

have been called the Theatre City. Orissa Theatre of Kali Charan Patnaik was established in 1939. Initially it did not have a stage of its own; it toured the princely states to stage its plays. Later, on the 14th of February 1942, it staged *Girl School* on a temporary structure, which had been raised in 1941 near Shri Ram Chandra Bhavan in Cuttack. Pandit Godabarish Mishra inaugurated it. The play ran there for several days. I went to watch the performance with my friends. Actors like Samuel Sahu and Priyanath Mishra took part in the play. This play initiated many an artist in Orissa into the world of theatre. Towards the end of the same year, the permanent pandal of Orissa Theatre was constructed on a plot of land belonging to Susil Palit in Bankabazar. Sir K.P. Srivastava, the Executive Councillor of Cuttack, inaugurated it. The touring troupe of Annapurna Theatre also attempted to house itself in a permanent stage. It started its performances in the renovated Capital Cinema of Naren Mitra, amid great publicity. I had witnessed two of the three plays staged there: *Mahapathara Yatri* and *P.W.D.*, both the plays were translated from Bengali. Kartik Kumar Ghosh, playwright was working for Annapurna Theatre. I used to meet him, whenever I went to watch a play. I also made the acquainstance of the artists. It was here that I first came in contact with Kashinath Sahu, and Radharani Devi. It was also here that I met the efficient manager of Annapurna Theatre, Bauribandhu Mohanty. After a few months, it once again resumed touring different parts of Orissa, staging plays. Perhaps, Bauribandhu babu was deeply hurt when he left Cuttack. He had realised that in spite of all the glamour associated with translations of Bengali plays, by staging them he could never hope to compete with Kali babu's Orissa Theatre, and win the heart of the audience. After the Annapurna troupe left Cuttack, Bauribandhu babu began his efforts to stage a comeback to Cuttack. His dream was realised on the 4th of November 1943, when Annapurna Theatre started its performance in the newly built permanent hall near Prakash Cinema in Buxibazar. Lady Lewis, the wife of the then Governor, Sir Hawthorne Lewis, inaugurated it. But on the inaugural night it could not

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

perform an original Oriya play. An old translated script, *Mahapathara Yatri* was staged. But after that, Bauribandhu babu tried to get original Oriya scripts for the stage. In response to his efforts, I wrote, *Yauban*, my first play for the professional stage, towards the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944. Its premiere was held in 1944. Those days Kali babu's *Bhata* was being staged at Orissa Theatre. So *Yauban* faced a stiff competition, and it continued for about 30 nights. It was the first original Oriya play to be staged on the permanent stage of Annapurna Theatre. The circumstances in which I wrote *Yauban* are extremely interesting.

A few scripts were ready with me by the beginning of 1943. I was eager to be associated with a professional theatre group. Kali babu and Orissa Theatre came to my mind again and again. Kali babu was quite well known to Banambar uncle. One was staying in Budhi Thakurani lane and the other at Jagannath Ballav. I wanted to show him the script of the play, *Trutiya Drushya*. I thought I would say, "I am Banambar babu's nephew. We stay at Kaligali. I have watched the performance of all your plays. I have written this one." I was also apprehensive that he might say no to me and dismiss me as a mere college student, a minor. I was unable to decide if I should call him or not; but one day accidentally I ran into him.

Kali babu was buying *rabidi* from Rangia's sweet shop at Binodbehari. He had gone there in a horse-driven carriage. I paid him my respects. He said, "What do you want, my son?" I introduced myself, "I am Banambar babu's nephew. I have a little work with you." He asked me my name and what I did. In an affectionate tone he said, "What work, dear?" By that time, a pot full of *rabidi* had been placed in his carriage. He called me and asked me to sit beside him. I got into the carriage mechanically. It drove past the Binodbehari temple and proceeded to Jagannath Ballav.

I felt uncomfortable while sitting by the side of a famous person like Kali babu. Like his writings, his personality and his dress also bore a distinguished air. That day he had put on a *dhoti*, a white punjabi made of fine *adi* cloth, and dark shoes.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

His hair had been brushed to one side. He brought out a *paan* from a silver box and put it in his mouth. He used a walking stick having a lion-shaped knob. His dress spread the fragrance of a light perfume. He asked me, "You said you had some work with me, what is it?" I replied cautiously, "I've written a play, *Trutiya Drushya*. If you would..." He interrupted me, saying. "Alright. Bring me the script."

In due course I gave the script to him. After a few days, I came to know that the rehearsal of the play had already begun. In the course of the rehearsal, my acquaintance with Samuel Sahu grew into friendship. Since I was staying in College Square area, it was not possible on my part to go and see the rehearsal. Moreover, the rehearsal was not held regularly. It would be held for three, four days and then would be discontinued. It would be resumed after a gap of a couple of days. Babi babu, as Samuel was popularly known, occasionally came to our mess to see me. At times, I paid a visit to him at his Chandi Road residence. He was not sure when the play was going to be staged. A couple of months passed. My anxiety grew. I could not say anything to Kali babu for fear that he might misunderstand me. Those days, the advertisement of the plays to be staged came out in the Oriya daily, the *Samaj*. One day, I came across a line printed below the advertisement of the play going on at Orissa Theatre. The line was: "When will *Trutiya Drushya* (The Third Scene) be staged?" I thought, there would be no further delay now. I was overwhelmed with joy. But nothing happened in the days following this. Everything was quiet. Sometimes, I asked Babi babu anxiously, "How do you like the script? What do the other artists think of it?" The reply was almost the same. "The script is good. The dialogues are excellent. The play will be a great success." In spite of all this, why is the delay? Why are they going to stage another play? I could not find a convincing answer. But I could gather this much from my several discussions with Babi babu that the staging of the play was being deliberately delayed. There was no way one could enter another person's mind. We could not guess what was there in Kali babu's mind.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

It was decided that one day I would go and ask him point blank, "When is my play going to be staged?"

It happened like this: One morning, on a holiday, I went to Kali babu's house. In the inner countryard, Kali babu was relaxing on a cot, his elbow resting on a pillow. On the edge of the cot, Bichitrananda Mohanty sat facing him. Mohanty, father of the famous musician, Akshay Mohanty, was a close friend of Kali babu. Probably he was the *nazar* in the office of the Revenue Commissioner. He knew me because my cousin, Sarada, worked in the same office in which he worked. Kali babu behaved as if he did not take note of my presence. After quite a while, in an unnatural tone, he asked me, "What do you want?" I had never heard him talk to me so rudely. Did he figure out that I had come to ask him about the delay in staging the play? I mustered courage and said. "I learnt from Babi babu that the rehearsal is over. When is the play going to be staged?" Kali babu flared up and curtly asked: "Which play? Whose play?" I felt nervous. I said, *"Trutiya Drushya."* In a rude voice, he said, "I do not have any such script with me. Go away."

I got really scared and my throat dried up. Everything around me grew suddenly dark. Tears in my eyes, I quietly went away from his house.

Instead of going back to the mess, I headed straight for my uncle's office. I told him everything. He was worried. However, he consoled me, saying, "We shall see." But everything had been made brutally clear to me. I said, "How can I establish that it is my script when he said in so many words that he knew nothing about it? If he stages the play in someone else name, what can I do? Why should anyone disbelieve him and believe me? Who knows me, after all?" But uncle comforted me and asked me not to worry. He said, "If you fear that he would do such a thing, go and meet Dama. Carry my letter to him and he would serve a lawyer's notice to Kali babu."

Next morning bearing a letter from uncle, I went to the residence of Damodar Mohanty, advocate. He was a relation

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

of ours. He was staying in the lane opposite Saraswat Press. Later, he become the Advocate General of Orissa. Dama babu read the letter, looked up at me and smiled. He said, "Come on Sunday in the morning."

I eagerly looked forward to Sunday morning. My mind was weighed down with all manners of anxieties. I reached Dama babu's house on Sunday. In the mean time, uncle had spoken to Dama babu. Dama babu brought out a letter from his drawer, which was addressed to Kali babu. He asked me to go through it. Although the letter was written in his letter-head, Dama babu had addressed Kali babu as "Dear Kali bhai." The language was polite, but there were hints of possible legal action in a case like this. He wrote that since the script was ready, it should be staged within a fixed time. In case the play was not going to be staged in near future, the script should be returned to the playwright. The matter should not be allowed to get complicated and should end here.

I went to Kali babu's house bearing this letter. He was sitting in the same place, as before. I bowed to him, placed the letter before him and stood quietly. He read the letter. I was surprised that his face showed no reaction at all. He said aloud, "Sumati, bring this young man's script from the room on the first floor and give it to him." Sumati brought the script. Without looking at me, Kali babu said, "Take it." I picked up the script, bowed to him and left.

Probably this was exactly what Kali babu wanted. Deprived of the chance to get a play performed on an established stage, I felt like a wounded animal. But the opportunity that had been lost came back miraculously a few months later, towards the end of the same year. Bauribandhu Mohanty had set up a permanent theatre in Cuttack, and he was looking for new scripts.

My school career had begun in Ravenshaw Collegiate School, Cuttack. Then I had shifted to Kujang. And after passing Matriculation examination in 1940, once again I came back to Cuttack to pursue higher studies. I got myself admitted into the I.A. class in Ravenshaw College. I had come full circle:

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

from Cuttack to Kujang, and back to Cuttack. My life began to spread in several directions, as I was attracted by the grandeur of Ravenshaw College, the growing nationalist spirit in the pre-independence days and the more expansive sphere of urban life. I felt as if my eyes and ears were getting slowly and gradually opened. It also seemed as if I could listen to the sounds more distinctly. I experienced so many things, the memory of which I would always treasure.

I had no clear idea about the subjects that I was to take when I was admitted to the college. Adwait Charan Das of village Kantapada near Jhankad was reading in the same college; he was one year senior to me. Following his advice, I took the subjects of the Arts stream. My friend at Kujang, Bipin got admitted to first year science. Later, Adwait babu became one of the most famous homeopathic doctors of Orissa. After I.Sc., Bipin studied in Cuttack Medical School.

Those who later distinguished themselves in the fields of politics, art, culture and literature—Biren Mitra, Manmohan Mishra, Banka Behary Das, Pradipta Kishore Das, Suren Mohanty, Nayan Kishore Mohanty and Upendra Samal—all were in Ravenshaw College those days. Samal was the founder of the Oriya magazine, *Arati*. At one time, Mayadhar Mansingh was its editor.

Biren Mitra easily stood out among the students. This tall man used to walk along the corridor, his hand on someone's shoulders. If I passed by, he would call me and say, "Come here, Manu. How are you? Where do you stay? Is it in Budhi Thakurani lane?" Manmohan Mishra was perhaps doing his M.A. in English. His speech could set one's blood on fire. His fiery language, clear accent, the fluency of his inspiring speeches, cast a spell on the audience. His speeches were greeted with thunderous applause. Manmohan babu and Pradipta babu contested for the post of President of the College Union. The Physics Lecture Theatre, the venue of the meeting, was packed with students. Professor Balabhadra Prasad conducted the meeting Manmohan babu, who was a leftist, set forth his plans and argued, why he should be elected.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

In course of his speech he came down heavily on the college authorities. He pointed to the Professor conducting the meeting and said, "These people are the spies of the government." The Professor took serious exception to such a remark. He asked Manmohan babu to withdraw it. Manmohan babu refused to oblige. He said that he had not used the expression in a derogatory sense; on the other hand, he thought it was perfectly respectable. He defended himself by citing a line from Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It*: The famous dramatist considered writers as 'God's own spies.' So there was nothing wrong in his use of word 'spies' with respect to the Principal and the Professors. The matter ended there. But Manmohan babu lost the election that year. The student community was unhappy with the role played by the Communist Party of India after the outbreak of World War-II. Pradipta Kishore Das, who was a follower of the new socialist ideas, was elected the President. Pradipta babu, a handsome and quiet man, and Banka babu, who was an affectionate person, were very popular among students. Bibhudhendra Mishra, or Kuni bhaina, as he was popularly called, was dear to students for his radiant face and his brilliant speeches. Among the senior students, who were not interested in politics, the poet, Binod Nayak was close to me. Clean-shaven and impeccably dressed, Nayak stood out among the students. Surendra Mohanty and Binod Nayak stayed in a mess near the embankment of Taladanda canal, close to Ravenshaw College. I often visited them.

Surendranath Patnaik, whom I called Sura bhai, was studying for B.A. when I joined the college. He was the son of the poet Balakrushna Patnaik and the younger brother of my cousin, Guni dei's husband. Sura bhai was Secretary of the College Union. I spent my hours of leisure with him in the Students' Common Room. The eminent sportsman, Nandakrushna Das, who brought laurels for the state in the decathlon event, was his close friend. I liked his neat beautiful handwriting the most. At times when he was busy chatting with Sura bhai in the Common Room, I looked at his notebook on some pretext or the other. His handwriting

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

matched his good looks.

Those days, most of the students came to college wearing dhotis. I do not say that no one wore trousers or shorts. Few put on loose pants and punjabis. The Amerian Army had given two gifts to the world: one was the jeep, and other, the hawai shirt. So the hawai shirt was not popular among students. They usually wore glad collar shirts. A few also wore double-cuff full-sleeve shirts. The Professors came to the college dressed in suit, coat and tie. A few like Professor Artaballav Mohanty, Professor Karunakar Kar and Professor Girija Shankar Ray were exceptions. Together they came to the college riding a horse carriage. One or two of them drove a Ford or Austin car. The roads of Cuttack were not crowded those days. Many were scared that if a wound in the foot came in contact with horse-dung, the person might contract tetanus. Except only a few, most students put on chappals, shoes or even full shoes with dhotis. The initial excitement of coming to the college riding a green imported *Raleigh* bicycle and loitering in the corridors dragging a pair of *nagara* chappals soon subsided. Gradually, the warm liveliness of the city began to envelop me. Those days, Cuttack was not only the commercial hub of the state, it was also the centre of Orissa's cultural and political life. In the struggle for India's independence, Cuttack's role was no less active than that of other places in the country. The new awakening in the city quickened my pulse.

I witnessed most of the major events that took place between 1940 and 1947. Although I was not directly involved in these, they all left a profound impression on me. Probably for this reason, my early writings reflected a nationalist fervour. After I received a few blows from a constable during the Quit India Movement I began working on the first draft of *August Na*. This play was based on the impression of a student living in Chhartabandhu Mess at Ranihat. Perhaps, for that reason my play *Yauban*, which was staged at Annapurna theatre in 1944, appealed to the youth to rise and take part in the struggle.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Awake youngmen,
Freedom beckons you
Fulfil your youth
Save the honour of your Nation.

This is also the reason why memory of the Paika Uprising of 1817 resounded in my play *Bidrohi Jagabandhu,* written in the years following India's independence, and later renamed *Buxi Jagabandhu.*

World War II broke out in September 1939, the year before I got myself admitted to college. On one side were ranged the Allies comprising Britain, United States, etc. and on the other, the Axis comprising Germany, Italy and Japan. Several nations had lost their identity due to Hitler's policy of aggression. Congress took a decision that unless there was a firm commitment to granting full independence to India after the war Indians would not have anything to do with the war. But the Viceroy of India made a unilateral declaration that India had entered the war as an ally of Britain. Thus India officially joined the war.

Protesting against this, Gandhiji launched Individual Civil Disobedience Movement. The movement began in Orissa in December 1940. Santh Binoba Bhave was the first in the country to disobey Government laws. Pranakrushna Padhiary led the movement in the province of Orissa. The Congress leaders chosen to take part in this movement delivered their speeches in public meetings and courted arrest. These meetings were held at Gourishankar Park in Cuttack. One cold afternoon in December, I went to attend one such meeting. A lean man in khaddar dhoti, punjabi and Gandhi cap arrived at the venue, which was thronged by a vast crowd, shouting 'Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai', 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' and 'Vande Mataram'. The man gave a short speech explaining Gandhiji's viewpoint and the programme of the Congress, and courted arrest. He was Biswanath Das the first Prime Minister of the first Congress Government in the province of Orissa. On another day, I saw Sarala Devi courting arrest at the same place,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

in the same manner. Leaning against the fence of the Park and watching the scene wide-eyed, I wondered what tremendous impact Gandhiji exercised on Indians in general and his followers in particular. That unforgettable scene could never be erased from my memory.

I was present at another meeting held in the Town Hall in January 1941. These two meetings left an indelible impression on my mind. At the time I was feeling as if I had lost my way in a sugarcane field. I was eager to find out what was happening around me. So I attended the meeting at the Town Hall. Manabendra Nath Ray, the founder of the Radical Democratic Party, was to address this meeting.

Many things were heard about Ray. Some said that he was an unrivalled orator. A few others talked of him and Lenin in the same breath. Karl Marx had introduced the idea of capitalism in the world. He had given a call to the workers: "Workers of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose, but your fetters." The Russian Revolution took place in 1917, under the leadership of Lenin, a staunch follower of Marx. People said that Ray was a close associate of Lenin, and since he had developed serious differences with Stalin, he came away to India. A few others did not fail to remark that he now worked as an agent of the British. Chief among his followers in Orissa was the famous tax consultant, advocate and orator, Madhusudan Mohanty, who was bringing out a journal entitled, *The Observer* from Cuttack. At the time, Braja Sundar Das, who was in charge of the National War Front and Pandit Nilakantha Das supported the war policy of the Government. M.N. Ray had been invited to Cuttack by these people to counter Gandhiji's views and to mobilize opinion in favour of India joining the war.

There was a large crowd in the hall. A petromax lamp had been lit and placed on a table on the dais. Ray, a tall man, rose to his feet and began his speech. A member of the audience interrupted him by putting to him a question, and condemning the British position on the war. Then heated arguments and counter-arguments ensued, which ultimately

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

resulted in an exchange of blows. Ellen Ray, M. N. Ray's wife, rushed at the crowd aggressively, in an attempt to silence the protest. She rolled up her full sleeves, jumped onto the table on the dais, and challenged the hecklers. As pandemonium broke loose, I along with a few others slipped away. Fifty years after independence, violence in public meetings has become a routine affair; but an incident like this was the first of its kind at that time.

Although I was drawn towards leftist ideals in my student days, I did not like the activities of the Communist Party of India. It seemed then that the party was physically present in India, but the Soviet Union controlled its soul.

The people of the country did not approve of the role of the Communists during the spontaneous Quit India Movement of 1942. I never thought of joining the Communists, but at personal level, never did I pick up a quarrel with anyone. Although I never joined any political party, towards the end of my student career, I was drawn towards the socialist camp within the Congress Party. That happened, when we formed 'Janasanskruti Sangh' under the auspices of the Socialist Party.

Mayadhar was one of my classmates in Kujang High School. Every day, he had to walk four to five miles from the village, Mallasahi near Taladanda bridge to come to school. He was a bit closer to me than others. His village was famous in the locality for the large fair held there every year on the occasion of Dola Purnima. Rajarani dance and bull dance were two highlights of the fair. The village was known for another thing: *suryakanji* prepared at the Mallasahi *math*. It was preserved for years. People came from distant places to take the *kanji*, which was useful for the treatment of rheumatism and epilepsy. I had been to his village several times during my school days. Once a farmers' rally was organised at Tirtol. He caught the Congress leader Harekrushna Mahtab's attention for the services he rendered in that fair. Then he came over to Cuttack. He discontinued his studies and stayed with Mahtab babu. He lived like a member of his family for many years. His close association with Mahtab babu

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

inspired him to join the struggle for freedom.

When I came to Cuttack Mayadhar had already spent three to four years with Mahtab babu. Those days Mahtab babu was staying in a bungalow in the Swaraj Ashram campus at Bakharabad. As I was staying with my uncle or with Sarada bhai in Kaligali, I used to visit Mayadhar regularly, especially in evenings when I went to the bank of river, Kathajodi. Many people used to come to the riverbank to take in the fresh air. The road from the Collectorate to Sunshine field was crowded in the evenings. Mahtab babu came to know me closely, as I used to visit Mayadhar. He asked me about my studies, and about the college. At times he asked me to do odd jobs for him. He was then bringing out a magazine entitled *Rachana*, and asked me to copy out the articles. Before the August Revolution, when Japan bombarded the British ships off the Kujang coast, the people of Orissa were scared. To give them courage and strength, Gandhiji sent Miraben to Orissa, who stayed in Mahtab babu's house. I had the opportunity to take dictations from her. Once Mahtab babu requested her to dictate slowly: "He is a college student. Please dictate slowly."

Although my college life began on this note, I could not break myself free from the hangover of the theatre at Kujang. I began writing a play called *Ratri*, but I always longed to take part in a performance. Is it easy to forget the experience of standing before the foot light and applying grease paint on one's face? Can anyone ever forget the exhilarating experience of putting on a wig and a false moustache and beard made of crepe? All these beckoned me on rehearsal evenings. By God's grace, I got an opportunity to act when I was an I.A. student. The play *Irani* was staged in the college.

The college drama was a great event in Cuttack. There was at the time a keen rivalry between the college and the Medical School on staging plays. The college drama was staged in the college hall. It was staged for two to three consecutive nights. Professors and eminent citizens of Cuttack were invited on one night. The theatre-loving scholars packed the hall. Preparations were made with great enthusiasm. Scenes and

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

dresses were brought over in large trunks from Calcutta. Other materials such as beads, caps, crowns, laced shoes and small properties were also brought in according to need. Rehearsals were held in a large room every evening.

I got an opportunity to play the role of the character of small Iran in the play, *Irani.* Kartik Kumar Ghosh directed the play, which was written by his elder brother, Aswini Kumar Ghosh. Kartik babu had already joined the touring Annapurna Theatre after completing his training at Uday Shankar Drama Centre, Almorah. There he had directed the translation of the Bengali play *PWD* by Jaladhar Chattopadhyay, which was a great success. Kartik babu also trained students taking part in group dance, besides directing the play, *Irani.*

Taking part in the college drama was considered a matter of prestige. Artists came to be known as heroes in the college. First year Intermediate students never got an opportunity to do a male role in the play. Freshers usually played female roles. Usually they had to appear as girls in the group dance. My playing the role of Iran was an exception to this convention. Perhaps my luck favoured me. Kartik babu himself selected artists. Ghanashyam Das, Professor of History, was present when the selection was made. He was in charge of the Drama Association. Professor Das was of a friendly and happy-go-lucky disposition, and he mixed freely with students during rehearsals and the staging of the play. He would come wearing pyjama and punjabi instead of trousers and coat; he would bring a tin of Goldflake cigarettes. He went into every detail and tried to know which artist came and who did not. He went to the green room several times to make sure that things were in order. On the day of the selection of artists, students desirous of taking part in the performance of *Irani* assembled on one side of a large room. Kartik babu gave an idea of what was expected of an actor playing a particular role, especially from the point of view of the stage. He also gave a description of the looks of a character. Students wishing to play the role came one after the other for a trial. When he had to select an actor for the role of Iran, Kartik babu said,

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"The actor playing the role of Iran should be a handsome, playful boy of sixteen or seventeen. He would enter the stage through a window, from the thick grapevines. He would deliver dialogues while entering the stage and would return in the same manner after that. Please act it out. "I came to the stage through a window. Although I did not know the theory of improvisation and its application on stage, the trial on that day was an act of improvisation. The acting was over in a few minutes. There was no need for delivering a few more dialogues. Kartik babu said, "All right. That will do." He looked at Professor Das. Ganashyam babu said, "I don't find anyone else who would suit the role." Then he looked at me and said, "Listen, you've done well. You are fit for the role. You are selected. Come to the rehearsal regularly. Is that clear?" I bowed to him and went back to my place.

I can't say how acting in *Irani* helped others, but it certainly influenced my life in several ways. It gave me a new direction. My life took a new turn. Several art forms combine to bring completeness to dramatic art. Script, acting, direction, dance, music, stagecraft, light and audio systems — drama is the combination of all these. It can't be imagined without the stage. So the playwright must keep the practical aspect of staging a play in mind while writing a script. My life as a playwright began with my association with the stage. I had set to work on the script of *Ratri* by the time *Irani* was staged. I had also started avidly reading plays. The plays in Professor Sundaram's list helped me arrive at a clear conception of what drama meant, and what constituted a good play. I felt pulled by two attractions: on one side, there was the thrill of acting on the stage and on the other, the joy of writing scripts. In the end, the latter triumphed over the former. Once I made up my mind, there was no problem. I wrote script after script.

After the staging of *Irani*, I had to appear on the stage for a few minutes, when the play *August Na* was produced by Jana Sanskruti Sangha at Puri. The artist, Akshay Kumar Mohanty, who was to play the role of the ghost of Sirajuddula, could not reach Puri until the last minute. Nitai Palit, who

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

directed the play, said to me, "Das, you put make-up on your face. Akshay could not come." Me? I felt surprised and said, "But what about the dialogues..?" My intimate friend, Sarada Prasanna Nayak, rushed from the green room and said, "Go and get ready. I shall do the prompting. It is only a small role after all. Don't play hard. Who else will play the role at this last minute?"

I appeared on the stage and played the ghost of Sirajuddaula. In one breath I uttered the dialogue of the ghost: After finishing the dialogue, I came back to the green room. And that was the last time I appeared on the stage. But I used to keep a close contact with the artists till the opening show of all my plays. I also used to hold regular discussions with the director. I would remain present at the time of the preparation of the stage and keep in touch with the technicians. I would move from the green room to the auditorium and take note of the reactions of members of the audience. I tried to find out if there was anything wrong in the script, which posed a problem for the production. Watching a play from the audience's point of view helped me to maintain harmony between the script and the performance.

Although World War II had started when I came to college, at the beginning the war had no impact on the prices. Gradually the prices rose. One Cuttacki seer was 105 tolas. A one rupee silver coin carrying the picture of Queen Victoria weighed one tola and 16 annas made one rupee. The metric system was introduced only after independence. Before the war, rice was available at 20 to 25 seers a rupee. 80 hilsa fish were sold at six to seven rupees. A seer of ghee cost a rupee. Prices rose after 1940. Rice was 15 to 20 seers a rupee, a seer of milk cost three to four annas, a seer of ghee a rupee and a half. A seer of fish cost four annas and meat eight annas. The rise was slow and steady. In 1953-54, when I was in fish business, I bought hilsa at Rs.17 to 18 a pana (eighty pieces) and khanga at Rs.20-22 a pana at Kujang, and transported them to Guny Company and Mossat Company of Howarh Market, Calcutta.

My father used to send me twenty to twenty-two rupees

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

a month for my studies and other expenses. The amount increased to twenty-five rupees later. There was absolutely no problem in managing with that amount. Food in the mess was good. There was a special dinner on every Saturday evening. A grand feast was arranged every month. We could invite our friends to these monthly feasts. There was a rush in the three restaurants in the College Square area; the *ganthia* shop of Baju bhai, the *rasogolla* shop of Madan and the Madrasi hotel. The sponge *rasogollas* of Madan's shop were famous not only in Cuttack, but in the whole of Orissa. The Madrasi hotel was perhaps the first South Indian hotel of Cuttack. The elder brother of Shri Parameswaram, the owner of Vijaya Hotel in College Square, owned the hotel. Parameswaram assisted his brother.

I started writing the play *Yauban* towards the end of 1943. By that time I had completed several plays: *Ratri* (1941), which was later re-named *Abhilash, Samasya* (1942), the incomplete first draft of *August Na* (1942), *Trutiya Drushya* (1942-43) and *Bekar* (1943). And all these were written in my student days, when I did not have any need and I was a happy-go-lucky person. Out of these, only *Ratri* was put on the stage. After *Yauban* was staged by Annapurna Theatre, I did not feel the need to publish these earlier plays.

After I gave the script of *Yauban* to Annapurna Theatre in 1944, I went down with a painful disease. I had appeared at the Test for B.A. examinations. Banambar uncle took me to his Kaligali residence. I could not appear at the B.A. examination that year; nor could I return to Minerva Mess. My stay in Cuttack, upto the early part of 1947 was spent at Budhi Thakurani lane residence and Sarada bhai's Kaligali residence.

I joined the Development Department in Orissa Secretariat in 1946. The Secretariat functioned in a building in Gourishankar Park, where later, City Hospital came to be located. Subsequently, the Secretariat was shifted to the barracks in the Cantonment road. I worked there till January 1948, when I left for Delhi. My service career started as a lower division assistant. By the time I left the job, I had been promoted to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

grade two and was close to grade one. The Secretariat was rapidly expanding those days. There were several sections in the Development Department: agriculture, industry, co-operation and forests. Later, each of these sections grew into a separate department.

My interest in drama did not diminish after I joined the Secretariat; on the contrary, it increased. I had established contact with the artists of Annapurna Theatre and Orissa Theatre. My friendship with theatre personalities like Nitai Palit and Gopal Ghosh had grown deeper. The circle expanded after I joined the Secretariat.

During these days, the play *Ratri*, which was renamed as *Abhilash*, was staged by the newly formed Roop Mahal Theatres in the Annapurna hall. Hrudananda Das, the *peshkar* of the Collectorate, had rented a house in Alam Chand Bazar for this institution. Like fish biting the bait, we gathered there almost every evening. The people who used to visit the place included Khagendranath Mitra of Manikghosh Bazar, Prabahas Chandran Roy, the Manager of the Government Handloom Institute, Gokul Chakravarty of the Telegraph Department, and Sadhu Charan Dalabehera of Jagannath Ballav. Among the younger people, Nitai Palit, Gopal Ghosh Ranjit Singh, Sachi Patnaik and Bipin Mohanty frequented the place. Hrudananda babu ungrudgingly donated money. He provided us with money needed for the rehearsals and for the conveyance of the female artists. The young poet, Shyamsundar composed the songs and set them to tune for *Abhilash*. Nitai Palit directed the play. Sadhu Dalabehera's two school going daughters, Rajeswari and Brajeswari, acted in it. He was my father's classmate in Victoria School, Cuttack. Brajeswari later became a teacher and Rajeswari trained as a doctor. She established herself as a writer of short stories.

The play, *Abhilash* possessed all the ingredients, which would appeal to the audience. Its dialogues were captivating. There was a scene in which a character had got drunk; there were gun shots, dance, music, in course of the action of the play. The production also included innovative lighting. At the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

individual level, actors and actresses gave good performances. In spite of all these, the play failed to touch the hearts of the audience. In other words, on the stage the play was complete failure. I tried to analyse and find out the reason of its failure. There was only one answer: the play had everything, but not the soul. It was not clear what the playwright wanted to convey. The play had been presented on the stage, like a spineless lump of flesh shaped into a handsome youngman. Now it became clear to me that the plays I had written before *Yauban* were the immature works of my apprentice years.

I was admitted to the B.A. class in 1942. The struggle for freedom had reached its climax—the dormant volcano had suddenly become active and was about to erupt. The atmosphere was charged with excitement. The All India Congress Committee in Bombay had adopted the Quit India resolution late in the night on 8th August 1942. The resolution had been drafted by Gandhiji and introduced by Nehru. He had been entrusted with the task of starting a non-violent mass movement in the entire country. Gandhiji had decided to launch the agitation after meeting the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgo. But he could not get the opportunity to meet the Viceroy. The British rulers, now scared, arrested Gandhiji and all the members of the Working Committee in Bombay in the early hours of 9th August. Gandhiji was lodged in Agha Khan Palace in Pune. He was clear in his mind that the British leave India. To a question by a British journalist "In whose hands would the British leave India?" Gandhiji's reply was forthright and unambiguous, "Leave India to God and if that is too much, leave it to anarchy."

Before going to jail at the hour when the morning star rose in the sky, on the 9th of August, Gandhiji called his Secretary, Pyarelal and left a message for the press: Every non-violent soldier of India's freedom struggle should take the vow: "Do or die."

The mouth of the volcano opened and it erupted. Slogans of 'Bande Mataram' rent the air. The whole of the country resounded with the call 'Do or die'. After the leaders were

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

arrested, common men assumed the leadership of the movement. Orissa did not lag behind other places. Cuttack became the centre of the agitation in Orissa; the city sprang into action after the morning editions of newspapers flashed the news. There were spontaneous outbursts of anger in Orissa, as in other parts of the country.

Mayadhar came to me after he received the news of Mahtab babu's arrest in Bombay. I was staying in the two-room Chhatrabandhu Mess near Ranihat bridge in Cuttack. We hid Mayadhar in the Mess. The police were looking for him. He was made to lie down on a cot, with a mosquito net spread over it. There was a lump of sugar wrapped in a piece of cloth and a glass of water on a table. A small glass for taking medicines was also kept there. The police in civil dress were looking for student leaders. A man came to our Mess in the morning and enquired about the residents. We gave him four or five names. It was quite unusual to hang the mosquito net during daytime. He noticed it and asked who the person lying under the net was. Pat came our reply, "He is very ill and hasn't left his bed yet." There was nothing suspicious about it. He saw the medicines on the table and found no reason to disbelieve us. He peeped into the mosquito net and went away. Our trick worked. There was tension in the college for a couple of days. Protest meetings were held. Mayadhar was impatient to come out and take part in the movement. A meeting was scheduled to be held in front of the college gate on the 13th of August. There was no distinction between leaders and common people at the time. No one bothered who was to give directions. I brought Mayadhar under an umbrella, his face covered.

Mayadhar pushed his way through the crowd, climbed the compound wall and launched into a speech. "The British rulers, Quit India. Bande Mataram. Hail Mahatma Gandhi." Another speaker also addressed the crowd. He was my classmate, Debendra Mohanty, a fair-complexioned young man in a spotless white dress. The police swooped on the meeting like hawks. The two were arrested. Mayadhar gave me his

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

wristwatch when he was taken to custody, a gold watch, manufactured by the West End Company. I fondly kept it. When he came out of jail after two years and nine months, he did not take back his watch from me. This watch, which witnessed an unforgettable moment in history, was later stolen in Delhi.

The August Movement gathered momentum. A procession started from the college gate on 15th August. The aim was to mobilise the support of students in other educational institutions. The procession was led by girls, who were followed by student leaders and common students like us. Everyone raised slogans. We came to the main gate of the Medical School through its back gate. Our intention was to reach Mangalabag. The police in red and round caps, marched by our side. When the girls passed by the gate of the Medical School and were out of the campus, the police stood on our way. The girls were separated from the boys, who were confined to the campus. Then there was a lathi charge. We ran helter skelter. I fell flat on the ground and I somehow managed to slip into Bipin's room in the Medical School hostel.

Friends of our college days and our working life go away from us as we get older. The warmth of their friendship gradually cools off. Many of them are forgotten. But the friendships of childhood and school days can never be erased from the mind. Time cannot sever the bond of those days. Bipin was one such friend of mine. He was the son of Kunja babu and grandson of a famous lawyer of Kendrapara, Madan babu. But he studied in Kujang and stayed in a neighbouring house, in the quarters meant for the employees of the Kujang Cooperative Bank.

Bipin cleaned the wound of my knee, and rubbed iodine on it. Ravenshaw College office had been burnt down that day, just before the procession started.

The 14th of July is a memorable day in world history. Inspired by the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, on that day in 1789, the people of France had started the French Revolution. They had attacked the prison, Fort Bastille situated on the outskirts of Paris. The piled-up anger of the people

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

had turned them wild. Likewise, people in 1942 burnt the office of Ravenshaw College. Students in groups indulged in acts of destruction. They entered the office, smashed chairs and tables and destroyed ceiling fans. They threw away the files. It was difficult to say who was doing what. I was present in the mob. Someone was trying to disconnect the telephone connection to the office room of Principal, Dr Prana Krushna Parija. He was unable to do it alone. Although he did not seek my help, I rushed to lend him a hand. Both of us beat the wire till it snapped. After that I entered the room. Quite a few students were busy tearing the papers and scattering the files. I stood a little away from the Head Clerk, Jagannath Mishra's table. Suddenly, I noticed a fire on the table of Sadhu babu. Someone had brought petrol in a tin and set the files on fire. Fire spread through the office. The entire office was full of smoke. Students rushed out of the office to safety. The excitement, heat and smoke made me breathless. I breathed freely after I came out. As if everything happened in a split second. I came to know that Bijoy Ketan Mangaraj, the son of the leader, Jadumani Mangaraj, was among the students who set the office on fire. Later, Bijoy became my colleague in All India Radio. His commentary on radio during the days when the Mukti. Vahini was fighting the Army of Pakistan thrilled the audience. His commentary was really exciting. No other programme, apart from Suren Mohanty's weekly, *Nakahile Bhala*, had enjoyed so much success.

It was difficult to know who took part in the incident of burning the college office. It was not possible that everything could be recorded in history. Student leaders who were sent to prison during and after the August Movement included Banamali Patanaik, Biren Mitra, Surajmal Shah, Bibhudhendra Mishra, Amitabh Mohapatra, etc.

Gourishyam Nayak, the local leader of Ersama, took the leadership of attacking the police station at Ersama during the movement. Probably, Ersama formed a part of the Kujang zamindari those days. Nayak was well known to my father. The news of his arrest led to a lot of discussion. Although I

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

wrote a part of the play *August Na* in 1942, I rewrote it in early 1947. The incident of raid and burning of Ersama police station kept recurring in my mind when I wrote the play. This is how it shaped the play's ending. The protagonist of the play, Amar, was sentenced to death in what amounted to a show-trial. When he was lodged in the condemned cell, his friend Biswanath came to see him for the last time.

Amar : Biswanath !
Biswanath : I've been allowed only two minutes.
Amar : You?
Biswanath : I have been released.
Amar : What are you doing now?
Biswanath : Staying home, doing nothing. What shall I do? I can't take a decision.
Amar : Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Biswananath? You say, you can't take a decision. Have the foreign rulers left the country?
Biswanath : I'm sorry, Amar. I shall set to work from tomorrow. Do you have any information of Jayant and Baruni?
Amar : Yes. They have been sent to the Andamans.
Biswanath : Amar!
Amar : And there is another information for you.
Biswanath : What?
Amar : I'll be hanged before sunrise tomorrow.
Biswanath : To be hanged!
Amar : Laxman Nayak, myself, and.
Biswanath : And?
Amar : My father.
Biswanath : Amar!
Amar : Yes, Biswanath, I couldn't imagine the rustic farmer could abandon his rice-field and take the plunge.
Biswanath : Did he organise the raid on the Police Station No. 7?
Amar : Yes.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Biswanath : Probably because you joined the movement...
Amar : Not at all. He himself felt that one should live like a man, fighting for freedom and dignity.
Biswanath : Amar, I salute you on behalf of all my countrymen.

The August Movement was not confined only to the students. It was the greatest mass movement, which swept the country. Like several musical instruments forming an orchestra, students, teachers, intellectuals, farmers, workers and above all, the public got united. Amar's father, a poor peasant, thus served as a symbol of this unity. At the background of the action of the play were the real incidents that I had actually witnessed as they took place. And my play was based on those real experiences.

The burning of the college office took place in 1942, Police oppression followed. The college was closed down; students' messes were closed. I left Cuttack for Kujang.

I visited Kujang regularly during the holidays, when I was studying in Cuttack. The fading memory of Kujang became lively during my temporary stay there. In 1942, I was staying at Kujang after appearing at the I.A. examination. There was already a pitched battle between the Axis and the Allied Powers. Subhas Chandra Bose, who was under house arrest in his Calcutta residence, escaped from India outwitting the British police. With Japanese support, he chose South East Asia as his battlefield. He formed the Indian National Army. Rangoon fell in March 1942. People were scared because there was a rumour that Japan was advancing towards India.

One day, during my stay in Kujang, the sound of cannon shots were heard. The Japanese navy sank six to seven British ships in the Bay of Bengal on the 6th of April 1942. The cannon balls caused tremor from the seaside villages of Harishpur and Marichpur to the Jambu region. Initially, we could not make out where the sound came from. We could not imagine that the war had moved so close to where we lived. However,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

things became gradually clearer, when ambulances from Cuttack arrived there with doctors, and Sister Barbara. The wounded soldiers washed ashore were taken to the hospital in Cuttack.

The Second World War came to an end in Europe in April 1945. But it took some more time for the Allies to defeat Japan on the eastern front. An American plane dropped an atom bomb on Hiroshima in Japan on the 6th of August 1945, and the city was destroyed. As many as 38,150 persons lost their lives. It was followed by the bombing of Nagasaki a couple of days later. Japan was devastated. After this, the terrible war came to an end, not only in the east, but also in the whole world.

A few of us went on a boating trip to the False Point and Hookitola, two important places, close to seashore in the Kujang estate during these days. Although I had visited these places several times earlier, this trip held a special significance for me. This time I did not only enjoy the long boating trip; the eyewitness account of an unprecedented incident left me wonder-struck. I felt, the incident had a direct link with the war.

In order to go to False Point or Hookitola from Kujang, one had to go by boat down the Taladanda canal up to the Choumuhani Lock. Thereafter the boat had to be rowed across the river Mahanadi. At times the boat moved along thin streams, which formed an intricate web in the Mahanadi delta, at other times it floated down the great body of water in the river. The mangrove forests on both sides of the saline water kept the area cool and shady. Sundari trees formed arches over the narrow streams. Both the banks of the tributaries were densely overgrown. Water entered the forests during high tides and receded during low tides. Countless birds perched on the tree branches.

At several places hung snakes, large and small. The light-house was built on the False Point, which was surrounded by branches of the river and the mangrove forests near the sea-shore. The East India Company took over the Barabati fort

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

from the Marahattas in 1803. In 1928, the masonry of the fort was sold off with the approval of the Commissioner Fekenham. A hundred pieces of stone cost only four to five rupees. With these was built the lighthouse on the remote seashore.

A gaslight was lit at the lighthouse every day. Prisms were arranged in a circle, which scattered the light to distant places. A semi-circular shade rotated over the gaslight and made it flicker, so that ships sailing far away would not mistake it for a star. It gave an indication that the shore was not deep enough for ships to drop anchor. Only a few people lived at the lighthouse. They used to come to the weekly *hat* at Kujang. One had to cross a large body of water, miles in length, in order to reach Hookitola from False Point. Hookitola was almost an island. One side of it touched the shore. The Jambu canal was only a few miles from Hookitola.

The Hookitola bungalow situated on a high land was used as a guesthouse. Occasionally an official or two visited the place. There was a storey below the ground floor, which was used to store drinking water. It was not possible to get potable water from the wells or ponds of the locality. Tidal waves made the river water saline. The rainwater collected from the roof was drained through a pipe and stored in the basement. In other words, the rainwater collected on the roof was used as drinking water throughout the year. Those days there were only two permanent residents at Hookitola: a middle-aged chowkidar and his concubine, Puni, who ruled over the place. She was the monarch of all she surveyed. Fishermen coming from distant places begged her for a bucket or two of drinking water. They gave her gifts of hilsa fish, oil, chillies, and spices.

We heard an amazing story from the chowkidar and Puni at Hookitola. The incident had taken place only a few months ago. The Japanese soldiers had occupied Burma and were sending reconnaissance parties to the Indian coast. The story of the chowkidar and his concubine ran like this:

> One dark night two persons knocked at our door. (They were living in a thatched house near the main building) We got up. They were in khaki military dress and they

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

held large torch lights. Pistols hung from their belts: They asked us something in a language, which we could not make out. We trembled in fear. Through gestures they asked us not to panic and directed us to open the rooms of the building. They moved all around the place. They wanted to know who else were living there. We told them through gestures of our hands that no one else lived there. They went back to the riverbank and sailed away in a motor boat.

The chowkidar also gave a description of the two persons: flat nosed, and white-complexioned. We inferred from what the chowkidar and Puni narrated to us that probably two Japanese soldiers came by a motor boat outwitting British soldiers to Hookitola for reconnaissance. Perhaps, it was part of the secret military aimed mission occupying the British colony. Possibly, they had instructions not to do any harm to the natives in India, and for that reason, they left Puni and the chowkidar unhurt. But this was only what we guessed. This time I experienced a thrill when I returned from Hookitola.

When I was a college student, my holidays were spent at Kujang and my working days in Cuttack. I enjoyed my days at Kujang. When in Cuttack, I was preoccupied with theatre. The circle of my friends had grown wider for this reason. By the time I was in the fourth year B.A. class, it was quite well known among my friends that the script of *Trutiya Drushya* had been turned down by Orissa Theatre. It formed a topic of hot discussion those days. But I tried to maintain a distance from all this. I was aware that the final B.A. examinations were close at hand. I started serious preparations for the examination in 1943.

It was winter. Christmas holidays were only a few days away. One afternoon, a horse-driven cart suddenly stood in front of Minerva Mess. Two pèrsons, one lean and the other a little hefty, emerged from it. Both of them were of short stature. A man in pleated white dhoti, khadi punjabi and palm shoes asked, "Is it Minerva Mess? Manoranjan Das stays here?"

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

My friends had no difficulty in recognizing them. They escorted them to the front room of the Mess. I rushed into the room when I was informed of their arrival. I was surprised to see Bauribandhu Mohanty, the manager of Annapurna Theatre, and the dramatist, Kartik Ghosh, in our Mess. I had known Kartik babu since the days when I played a part in the play, *Irani*. I had seen Bauribandhu Mohanty only from a distance. After introductions, Kartikbabu led off, "Bauribandhu babu has come to meet you. You know, Annapurna Theatre has started to stage plays in its permanent hall. He wants to put up your play, *Trutiya Drushya* there." I felt an electric current coursing through my body. I could not give a coherent reply. I only stammered. "That book, the script." Bauribandhu babu did not let me finish. He went on talking. There was something unique about the way he spoke. He spoke humbly, at times folding his hands. He was expert at getting his work done, however difficult it might be. He said, "I know, I know everything. I have heard everything from Samuel. I shall stage the play and show to everyone what the play is worth. I shall stage the play at any cost." But I did not agree. I did not want it to be staged. Bauribandhu babu would not take 'no' for an answer. He was determined to take the script from me. He had realised that he had to stage new Oriya plays and not plays translated from the Bengali. After a lot of persuasion, I agreed to write a new play for Annapurna Theatre. Christmas holidays were close at hand. I gave them my word that I would not go home during the holidays and would write the play. Bauribandhu babu and Kartik babu left Minerva Mess after an hour or so after extracting from me a promise that I would write a play for them. The carriage was waiting for them.

After Bauribandhu babu and Kartik babu left Minerva Mess with an assurance from me that I would write a play for them, I felt as if a butterfly had emerged out of a chrysalis. At that moment I felt that I had at last become a 'hero'.

True, I experienced the excitement, but the responsibility of writing a play during Christmas holidays weighed on me. My friends in the Mess encouraged me and I got down to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

work. It was quite a task to copy the first draft. "Write in fury and correct in phlegm" – this was how I set about my task. I wrote in a hurry, without paying much attention to right and wrong, language and spelling, and corrected the draft afterwards. And after the corrections were made it was always hard work copying it and preparing the final draft.

Nitya had volunteered to copy the corrected draft. After getting an assurance from him, I proceeded to write *Yauban*. His handwriting was excellent, and he copied the play until late into the night. The final draft was ready by the end of Christmas holidays. I heaved a sigh of relief after I handed the script to Bauribandhu babu.

After this, I busied myself in preparing for my examination. A few days before the Test Examinations, I felt severe pain in my abdomen. I could not get up from the bed. I had never suffered so much after the attack of smallpox. When uncle came to know of it, he took me to his Kaligali residence, I was given a couple of homeopathic doses from Bipra babu. He said, "Isorectal abscess would burst after he takes the medicine."

The abscess burst, but the wound did not heal. I was unable to move and I had to lie on bed, suffering unbearable pain. Allopathy had not advanced far those days. People were not so conscious of the need for medical treatment. A few advised me to go for 'chancy' treatment. Only 'chancy' doctors had the required expertise for dealing with this kind of problem, they said.

A large signboard at Mani Sahu Chhak in Buxi bazar announced: "Chancy treatment available here." On both sides of the letters there were the pictures of two upstanding hooded cobras. The name of the doctor was also written there, below the picture.

My uncle went there. Dr. Rao, whose complexion was as black as charcoal and whose body was stiff like a log of wood, was entrusted with my treatment. On the first day, Dr Rao came to our residence and introduced himself at a considerable length. The sum of what he said in a mixture of Oriya,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Telugu, Hindi and English is: "This method is 'especial'. Their family had practised this for seven generations. There is a family secret about it. Goddess Manasa, taking form of a cobra, had revealed this to my forefathers in a dream. Many patients have been cured. There won't be any pain at all. What is pain after all? Now I'm treating Professor Bansidhar Samantray of Ravenshaw College. I visit him every day. After finishing my work there, I shall come to you, at 9 o'clock every morning. I guarantee that you will be cured."

As a drowning man holds desperately on to a straw, I had no alternative but to place myself at Dr Rao's disposal. He took twenty to twenty-five days to complete his treatment. But the real problem began after that. The wound would not fill up, its mouth remained open. The much-advertised "especial" treatment of the self-styled doctor did not work in my case. We got worried. One morning, Dr. Rao came and announced, "I've found the secret from my father's notebook. I give you my word that one particular oil will heal the wound." He went on to explain how to prepare the oil: Boil a swan's meat with some herbs. Extract the oil and apply it to the wound, and it will be healed. The cure is guaranteed, sir." But he made it quite clear, "Remember, not a duck, but a swan." This made me recall two lines from Madhu Rao's *Barna Bodh*, the Oriya primer:

The swan plays in the river.
Someone plays on a flute on the riverbank.

A swan had to be procured. We had now a problem on our hands: Where to find a swan in Cuttack? People advised us to look for one in the villages. Some suggested that we go to the New Market in Calcutta. But a friend said, "Ahmed Bux has swans. I have seen a couple of swans waddling in front of the Seminary School."

My uncle requested zamindar Ahmed Bux to part with one of his swans. Bux was worried when he heard about the acute pain I was going through. He agreed. A swan was killed and oil extracted from it. It was applied to the wound for

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

several days, but to no avail. After a few weeks, the doctor came and said, "The oil won't work now. The wound will heal on its own after a few days. There is no need to worry. Wounds heal up like that."

After the 'chancy' doctor's treatment failed, I came to Kujang. One day, I chanced on an advertisement in the daily *Samaj*. It related to Dr J. Choudhury, the founder of Jagannath Homeo College in Puri. Somehow I had a feeling that he would be able to heal my wound and get me cured. I wrote a long letter to him, describing my plight and seeking his help. After a few days, a postcard arrived which said, "Received your letter. Come here at once." I went from Kujang to Cuttack by boat and from Cuttack to Puri by train. Dr. Choudhury's Homeopathic college and hospital was situated on the first floor of a building on the Grand Road. I stayed for a couple of days in Puri and returned to Kujang after getting medicines for a month. I took the medicines observing strict rules. Surprisingly, the wound started healing up.

The play, *Yauban* was staged on Annapurna Theatre on 14th July 1944, while I was undergoing homeopathic treatment at Kujang. I came to know from letters I received from my friends in Cuttack that Orissa Theatre and Annapurna were engaged in a stiff competition. Their plays were advertised by using microphones in the lanes and bylanes of Cuttack. Probably Kali babu's *Bhata* was running in Orissa Theatre at the time. It was difficult to surpass Bauribandhu babu in giving his plays publicity.

An open truck was decorated for the advertisement of *Yauban*. A huge portrait of Mother India was placed in its tray and the artists sang in chorus:

Arise young men, listen to the call of freedom.
Fulfil your youth, keep up the prestige of the nation.
The future of India is in your hands.
Will you let your youth go waste?
Arise, O you, who lie asleep.

The truck drove through the roads and lanes of Cuttack

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

and the loud speaker attracted people to it. Handbills were given away in large numbers. The heading read: "A college student's play *Yauban*; to be staged at Annapurna." This publicity stunt paid rich dividends.

But I was not present in Cuttack to witness the premiere of *Yauban*. It had not been possible on my part to go to Cuttack by bus. Arrangements were made so that I could go to Cuttack in a goods boat carrying goods. But at the last minute the boat had to cancel its trip. I stayed back at Kujang. It was raining throughout the day and my mind was full of thoughts about the play. Rains at Kujang did not necessarily mean that it was raining in Cuttack. But I had a fear that people might not turn up in large numbers, if the weather was rainy. But the rain stopped in the evening. The sky cleared. I bowed to Lord Raghunath at the place where his idol is usually worshipped on Dola Purnima day every year.

After a few days, I travelled in a goods boat to Cuttack. When I arrived in Cuttack. I found Bauribandhu Mohanty's face glowing with joy. The actors came in, who included Kartik da, Kasinath Sahu, Madhusudan Dutta, Benudhar Patnaik, Natabar Sena and Master Mania. At a little distance stood the female artists: Sabitri, Nirmala and Heera. I went up to Master Mania and reverentially bowed to him. He said lovingly, "My blessings are with you, my son."

I had drifted like a rudderless boat from 1944, when I had completed writing the script of *Yauban*, to 1947, when *Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanj* was staged on Orissa Theatre. Many incidents took place in the mean time and added colour to my life.

During the first part of this period I had to go to Puri frequently for receiving treatment. Dr Jagannath Choudhury, popularly known as Dr J. Choudhury, belonged to Ichhapur. In Puri, he stayed near the house of the renowned lawyer, Gangadhar Mohapatra, in Suar Sahi. He had received education at Cambridge School, an English-Medium School in Madras. He was also fluent in Latin. He had received training in homeopathic medicine. He stood out among others for his

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

fearless radiant personality. He had only two options before him, to like somone or not to like him. He went all out to help the man he liked. If he did not like a person, he would never care for him, no matter how influential or powerful that person was. In politics, he never flinched from criticizing a man, however big he might be.

A few days after the Annapurna Theatre produced *Yauban*, I went to Puri. I was now on the mend. Dr Choudhury was glad that the medicine had worked very fast; he was also glad to know of the play. Somehow, he developed a liking for me and refused to charge me for the treament. If I went to Puri for a day, he would detain me for five days. Initially, when I had gone to him as a patient, I used to feel intimidated. However, I gradually got closer to him and became almost a member of his family.

Dr Choudhury treated me twice. A few days after my play, *Agami* had been put on the stage, I went to Dr Choudhury for the second time. This time I had chest-pain and I suspected it might be TB. I thought, I might have contracted it because I smoked. He examined me and assured me that it was not TB. But he found a 'spot' in my chest and started his treatment. Whenever I went to Puri, I usually stayed there for a few days. Dr Choudhury was the Chief Scout of Orissa those days. He wore khaki scout dress and put on a Baden-Powell badge. He was trying to regenerate the gymnasia of Puri. An association named "Shri Jagannath Byayam Jaga Association" had been formed with Dr Choudhury as its President. I was its Secretary. I had the opportunity to visit most of the gymnasia of Puri. A room had been provided to me in the homeopathic college building. Arrangements had also been made for my meals in Bhalu babu's hotel in the market lane on the other side of the grand road. I used to visit the hotel with two homeopathic students, Daitari babu and Khageswar babu. When I sat at the table, a framed motto covered with soot used to draw my attention. It was a fashion those days to hang framed mottoes on walls. My uncle, the famous poet Balakrushna Patnaik, had left Bentakar and settled in Athagarh. On the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

walls of his house named Dina Kutir, he had hung a lot of these mottoes. Udaynath Mohanty, a distantly related uncle who had settled in Khurda, was a Gandhian and freedom fighter. On his walls too, were hung a lot of mottoes. I used to feel inspired whenever I visited him and set my eyes on these mottoes.

In the days following independence, values had not been eroded. The flames of nationalism had not gone out in the minds of people. Perhaps for this reason, the owner of the hotel did not think of attracting customers by hanging nude pictures on the walls and hung mottoes instead. After ordering rotis for me and while waiting to be served, my eyes usually fell on the lines composed by Utkalmani Gopabandhu Das:

Rule by force will come to an end
People's will shall rule the land.

In my play, *Agami*, I dramatised the dangers threatening the newborn democracy in India. I thought of writing another play puncturing the pretensions of a few and exposing the conspiracy to sabotage democracy. The mottoes I sat facing day after day in that hotel inspired me to write the play, *Abarodh*. The climactic scene of the play draws its inspiration from these mottoes. The central character of the play, the Chief Minister, is deceived and deserted by his ministerial colleagues pursuing narrow personal gains. The helpless Chief Minister, Das is offered consolation by his beloved daughter, Banani, who also worked as his private secretary.

Banani Don't lose your heart, father. A true servant of the nation always travels along a dark path, all alone.

Das All alone, Banani

(Das goes and stands gazing at the photograph of Gopabandhu Das helplessly. Lines composed by the patriot-poet issue spontaneously from his heart. He recites the lines slowly)

The ruler exists for the ruled
So say the scriptures

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Their safety and welfare
Are the ruler's concerns.
There will be no sorrow nor misrule
None will suffer for want of food
No poor man shall die
A victim of a rich man's blows
The rule of fear shall come to an end
The will of the people shall prevail.
(Sound of gunshot, followed by commotion)

Banani : The police shot at the crowd, father.

Das : (Helplessly) They did not listen to me. (Sound of more gunshots)
No, they did not obey the Chief Minister's orders. He became a victim of the conspiracy of the capitalists. Bureaucrats have been led by the Home Minister, and they ordered firing at the peaceful procession. 'The will of the people shall prevail'—it remains only a dream.

One day, in 1952, I handed my newly published play *Agami* to Dr Choudhury. His eyes were drawn to an inner page, which contained the 'Dedication'. The book was dedicated to him:

> To the most revered Doctor J. Choudhury, M.A., M.D., Puri, whose magic touch saved me from certain death, and restored my confidence in life, this book is dedicated as a token of love and respect.

Dr Choudhury, whom I used to address 'Sir' by this time, closed the book and said nothing for a few moments. Then he glanced through the pages and said, "What are you writing next?" I said, "*Abarodh*, I've finished writing the script, but it's yet to be put on the stage." My visits to Puri were really unforgettable. Because of my proximity to Dr Choudhury I came in contact with many eminent persons including Satyapriya Mohanty and Bhagaban Pratihari. Mohanty, a freedom fighter, later became a minister in the State Cabinet and Speaker of

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the Orissa Legislative Assembly. Pratihari went on to become a leading organizer. Pranabandhu Kar lived at Duttatota in Puri. At times I visited his house and exchanged small talk with him. Banchha Abadhan, a well-known astrologer who came to Dr Choudhury for treatment, once studied my horoscope and made certain predictions.

My acquaintance with Ramaranjan Mohanty grew into friendship in Puri. He was staying in the Market lane those days. I first met him when I was a resident of the Minerva Mess. He had come there with a few samples of muga silk clothes of Assam. After I got to know him better, my first question to him was a direct one: "How could you begin *Goudabijeta* with such powerful dialogues?" He was surprised at my question and asked me, "Have you read the play?" In reply, I recited the first dialogue of Ismail Khan, which I had committed to memory. And I added, "I've read it thoroughly."

When we met in Puri, we often talked about *Goudabijeta*. He remembered a few actors, who had taken part in the play when it was staged in Ravenshaw College. The actors included Akshay Das of Jajpur, Ratikant Patnaik and Kailash Pati of Mayurbhanj, Braja Kishore Nayak of Khurda and Dinabandhu Sahu of Kendrapara. Sahu, who played a female role, later became a leading lawyer and a minister. I started practising law in Cuttack in 1956, and my visits to Puri became less frequent.

In 1944, life without work in Kujang became unbearable, although I occasionally visited Cuttack and Puri. I nostagically remembered my days in Cuttack. Surendra Mohanty, who was working in the Revenue Commissioner's office, was staying in a room on the first floor of Orissa Hotel located in Kaligali, opposite Orissa High Court. Later he shifted his residence to Nimchouri. He used to visit us regularly. He was fond of watered rice and spinach prepared by my aunt. He would spend hours in our house and would read out his stories to me.

Sura babu had recorded his experience of those days in his autobiography entitled *Patha* O *Pruthivi* (The Way and the World: 1986):

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

In my student days, I was greatly influenced by Edwin Arnold's The *Light of Asia*. In fact, I have felt drawn towards Lord Buddha and Buddhism from that time. I started writing a play *Pruthivi Ballav* based on the life of the Buddha. The renowned playwright, Manoranjan Das, who was junior to me by a year or two, was staying in his uncle's house in Kaligali. He was ailing and was bed-ridden. I would go to his house and read the scenes I had written the previous night to him. He praised these highly. These would give him temporary relief. His appreciation of my work inspired me. I know, it is not possible to write without readers admiring one's work. Manoranjan babu can say from where he derived the inspiration to write, but he got really engrossed in my play, when I read out the scenes to him. And that encouraged me to finish the play in a short time.

It was not only his play, *Pruthivi Ballav* that he read to me; he made me listen to readings of most of the stories he wrote those days. I would come under the spell of his stories and forget my pain. He once asked me, "Manu babu, have you read Havelock Ellis?" I said no. He took out a copy of the book, which had lost its cover, and the pages of which had come loose. I started reading the book. I was drawn towards Psychology. Philosophy was one of the subjects taught at the BA level. Psychology was a paper carrying 100 marks and was taught as a part of the subject Philosophy. I came to know about Sigmund Freud. Since Havlock Ellis's book was about the subconscious, dream and sex, I liked it very much. After that I read the works of Freud and other psychologists. I also went through works on Karl Marx and learnt about his philosophy of class struggle, these ideas had deeply influenced my mind. By the time I wrote *Agami* and *Abarodh* Marxist philosophy could not exercise its hold on my mind for long. I came to realise that I had to be familiar with not only the works of western philosophers like Freud, Adler, Jung, but also the works of Oriental philosophers like Batsyana in order to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

discover the secrets of the human mind, its conscious and subconscious layers and the influence of sex on human life. These works certainly encouraged me to probe man-woman relationship and to reach the real man lying beneath the surface.

During 1944-45, when I was staying at Kujang and undergoing treatment, Brundaban Patra of village Chatua came. Patra was a Cogress worker, a plain and simple man. His manners were pleasant. At times he showed the scars on his back left by lashes, which he had received during the Salt Satyagraha, when the police lathi-charged the peaceful volunteers. He always slung a khaddar bag across his shoulder. I had known him since 1942. During those days, I knew most of the Congress workers of Kujang including Narayan Birabara Samant, Ratnamali Jena, Brundaban Patra, Kanduri Malik, etc.

Brundaban babu told me, "Manu, you are not well and you don't get about much. You must be feeling uncomfortable, sitting idle at one place. Come and join Chatua M.E. School. I'll make all the arrangements. A large room will be set apart for you. You can have your office there. If you want to take a class, you can ask the students to come to your room. Special arrangements will be made for your meals. I'm sure, there won't be any difficulty. Chatua is only four miles away from Kujang. If you want, your meals will be brought over from Kujang every day. We receive letters from the authorities that since there is no headmaster the grant of the school will be stopped. I request you to come and join the school."

Brundaban babu was the Secretary of the school's Managing Committee. I could not say no to him. I stayed at Chatua for a few months. Gradually, I got a feeling that I was getting cut off from the rest of the world. I felt lonely and deseperate. I regularly kept in touch with Sura babu. We used to write to each other. He had left his job and had joined *The Observer* published by Madhusudan Mohanty. One day I received a letter from Sura babu, in which he suggested that I come to Cuttack. "Why are you sitting idle at Kujang? Come here and join us." I felt I had at last found a way out; so I decided to leave for Cuttack. I traveled from Chatua to Kujang by a

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

bullock cart and from there I set out for Cuttack. However, I did not join *The Observer*. I stayed at Sarada bhai's residence and prepared myself for the B.A. examination. At the time Sarada bhai stayed in a thatched house near Ganesh temple. My friend Baishnab and Barada babu from Kujang stayed in our uncle's house at Budhi Thakurani lane, paying rent.

World War-II had reached a turning point. Although people in Cuttack were far from the theatre of war, they felt its indirect effects. Everything in the market was strictly rationed. It was not possible to get a *chhatak* of sugar or a drop of kerosene without producing a ration card. Under such circumstances, Sura babu's marriage took place in June 1945. He was then staying at Dagarpada. The groom was to come to his father-in-law's house at Nimchoudi. Before the procession started, it was found that there was no sugar to prepare tea for the goom's party. Baishnab, who was working in the Secretariat, was around. Fortunately he had a ration card. Sugar was bought from Saheb's control shop at Nanchoudi. After taking tea, the groom and his party took a bicycle procession to the bride's house.

Sura babu's marriage was aimed at effecting certain reforms in a traditional society. At Madhu babu's house, the groom was received by rickshaw-pullers of the town. A model of a cycle-rickshaw made of silver filigree work was presented to the groom as a gift. Later when Sura babu joined politics, I had taken up a job at Orissa Secretariat. We therefore found few opportunities of meeting each other. My relationship with Surendra Mohanty, the politician became tenuous. However, my love, respect and admiration for him remained undiminished.

Before World War II, many people from Kendrapara, Pattamundai, Kujang and Ganjam had left for Burma. Most of them worked as contractors, supplying piped water in Rangoon, and other towns there. Quite a few Oriya colonies had sprung up at different places in Burma. But the war turned their world upside down. When Japan attacked Burma, the Oriya people ran away for life, leaving all their property be-

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

hind and came back to their villages in Orissa.

I knew quite a few of them, who had returned from Burma—Baishnab Patnaik, Madhu Patnaik and Barada Mohanty. They all belonged to Kujang. To make a living, they started from scratch: they took up a job or set up a shop or worked as a petty contractor. Barada babu was staying in uncle's Budhi Thakurani residence. He had found a job as an organiser of home guards in a set-up called 'National War Front.' Braja Sundar Das, the eminent litterateur, editor and proprietor of Mukur Press, was one of its office-bearers.

In order to give protection to people and to train them to resist attacks from the enemy at the time of war, the Government had created two outfits: the Air Raid Precaution for towns, and village Guards for rural areas. These trained people to protect themselves in case of a bomb explosion. Trenches were dug at several places and sandbags were kept ready. As part of the drilling exercise, sirens would go off and the town would be blacked out. There was neither a radio station nor a television centre in Orissa then. So, the only way people could be informed about what to do in case of an air raid was by distributing leaflets.

Barada babu had to tour a lot in Mahanga and Salipur area in course of discharging his duties. During those tours he came close to the poet of the masses, Baishnab Pani, who was living in abject poverty at the time. Even in his sixties, he had to desperately struggle for making both ends meet. He wrote small pieces and sold them to the National War Front for a paltry sum of money.He also took up the job of a village guard. His work often brought him to Cuttack, and he stayed with Barada babu and Baishnab in the Budhi Thakurani residence. I had met him there on several occasions and exchanged small talk with him. On learning from Baradbabu that I was a fledgiling dramatist, Pani treated me with great affection, as if I was his own grandson.

Balakrushna Mohanty's troupe had once visited Kujang, when I was staying there. His village Palasoka lay on Jaypore-Nalibar road. My father knew him and had visited his house

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

once or twice. I remember Balakrushna Mohanty, the writer of plays and yatras, coming to our house, dressed in dhoti, shirt, coat, socks and full shoes. This picture of him had remained indelibly etched in my mind.

I once mentioned Balakrushna Mohanty to Baishnab Pani. I also asked Pani about Mohanty's rivalry with him. Barada babu, Baishnab and myself had joked with him on many occasions. Once I asked him, "I heard that you had made a *dholak* with monkey's skin. And when people heard the sound of your *dholak* in a concert, they used to come to the opera as if in a trance, like snakes being drawn by a snakecharmer's *padmatola*." He laughed aloud and said to Barada babu, "See, won't people come if I take part in a concert? Do I have to take recourse to a *dholak* made with monkey's skin for that?" He would stay in Cuttack for a day or two, collect a little money that was due to him from Braja Sundar Das and return to his village.

In the third decade of the twentieth century, Pani was bold enough to attack British rule in India:

Look my dear, the white ruler's prison has crumbled
The days of the British rule are over,
The Swarajists are on the rise
The Government have realised
Who is going to win and who is going to lose.
or
The Bania boy has put the fear of prisons out of our hearts
Fight for the country and go there again and again.
That's the only way
To break the poison-tooth of the ruler
or
Let British rule burn to ashes
They looted our country's treasure
And robbed our body of its strength.

The same poet had to change his tune in the fifth decade of the century. He had now to write verses in praise of the British and collect a meagre amount from the war front

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

publicity organiser to earn his livelihood:

Don't say 'Japan, Japan'
Japan is a cyclone
Germany a satan
The two are one and the same.
One looks at England
The other eyes our land
And Italy dances to their tune.

Pani's woes did not end here. Aged 72, a poor and pathetic old man, he had to address a begging letter to Harekrushna Mahtab describing his miserable plight.

After writing hundreds of books in Oriya
This man is bowed down by utter misery
Twelve months have passed since
The Government promised a stipend
My plight become unbearable as days pass
Secretaries have no time for me
Misery has brought me down with fever
They are too busy doing their work
and travelling by air
Their positions have blinded them
to the lot of people like me.

Pani was not the only artist to have met a fate like this. Most of the artists in Orissa have a similar tale to tell.

I am reminded of a similar incident, when I dwell on the last days of the poet. I was a witness to another sad incident that took place twenty-two years after Pani's death. I was the Secretary of the Orissa Sahitya Akademi and Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi at the time. My office was located on the ground floor of the Museum building in Bhubaneswar. At midday of the 24th July 1978, I received a call from the eminent singer, Akshay Mohanty, who was my niece's husband.

I was taken aback. I tried to find out why he called me.

"What's the matter, Akshay?"

"Kali babu passed away."

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Kali babu was no more. I had visited him a couple of days ago, in the Medical College Hospital, Cuttack, where he lay on a bed. He rested his dim eyes on my face and said feebly, "You have come, my son?" In spite of all our efforts, we could not arrange a cabin for him. His servant, Banamali, was there with him day in and day out.

Akshaya continued, "Banamali was there with him when he closed his eyes for ever. I and Babulal Doshi came to pay our last repects. Arragements are being made to take his body in a procession to the cremation ground. We have only two vehicles at our disposal, mine and the one from the *Samaj* office."

"His nephew Kishore babu, is he there? Where will the cremation take place ?"

Akshay briefly told me everything. He mentioned the route along which the procession would pass. He also said that *deula champa* or *devagni*, would be made available for the cremation of his body. The *deula karan* would provide a burning piece of wood from Lord Jagannath's kitchen.

I said hurriedly, "I'm coming." Akshay said, "Come with some money. There is a lot of problem here and money is needed badly." I guessed the problem. Akshay and Babulal made all arrangements for the procession at their personal level, but money would be needed for the cremation. I felt worried. I had no idea about the financial condition of his nephew, Kishore babu. In his last years Kali babu was penniless. He lay helplessly on a dirty bed in the hospital.

The funds of the Akademi had been deposited in the bank. There was only a little cash. I called Dhiren Patnaik, Chhual Singh, the accountant and Pujapanda, the head clerk. I collected whatever little cash was available with them—two thousand rupees or so—and set off for Cuttack. Patnaik and the Principal of the Music College, Minati Das, accompanied me. Gunakar, the driver drove as fast as he could. The procession had reached the Madhupur Kothi, which then housed the Cuttack station of All India Radio, by the time we reached. We paid our last respects to Kalibabu, and handed the money to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Kishore babu, discussed the arrangements to be made at Puri and drove back to Bhubaneswar. We had to return immediately, in order to see about the cremation at Puri.

Sitakant Mahapatra, eminent Oriya poet, was Secretary to Government of Orissa, Department of Culture at the time. I rang him; he immediately rushed to the office of the Akademi and instructed the Collector, Puri to help us. In the afternoon, the body was brought to the gate of the Akademi office, where last respects were paid to the departed soul. Sanjukta Panigrahi and Raghunath Panigrahi were present among us. Raghu babu recited a *sloka*. Then the hearse proceeded to Puri. I retired to my office room. I was busy throughout the day and was tired. I was running a temperature and I found it difficult to get about. I looked out of the window at the hearse passing out of sight. My thoughts turned to Kali babu's last days. I remembered another incident. I was then a college student. Harindranath Chattopadhyay, the eminent poet who translated Sachi Routray's long poem *Baji Rout* into English and the younger brother of the poetess, Sarojini Naidu, was exhibiting his acting talent in our college. He sang a song.

A lawyer's pocket is heavy
A doctor's fees are high
An artist is doomed to entertain and die.

How right Chattopadhyay was! This was the fate of artists and litterateurs of this country. Whatever had happened in the case of Baishnab Pani, had been repeated in the life of Kali Charan Patnaik.

I had stayed in Cuttack for most of the period from 1945 to 1947. I was unsuccessful in the B.A. examination in 1945. I passed B.A. the next year, joined the Secretariat as a clerk and got myself admitted to the Law class. My younger brother, Bibhu, came to Cuttack in 1947 to pursue his studies; we left Budhi Thakurani lane and came to stay in Burdhaman compound in the Station bazar. We named our house 'Pathachhaya'.

After *Yauban* was produced (1944), I toyed with the idea

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

of writing new scripts for the stage. Professor Artaballav Mohanty taught us a few cantos from Upendra Bhanja's famous long poem, *Baidehisha Bilash.* In the first class he had given us a brief lecture on the life of the poet. Professor Mohanty's learned and inspiring lecture left the students spellbound. Dressed in fine dhoti, black coat and a half shirt he held forth on Bhanja's rightful place in Indian literature, his eyes closed. I found his lecture captivating and wanted to write a play on the poet.

I read historical works and gathered material from several sources. I also collected legends about Upendra Bhanja. Some said the poet had abdicated the throne. Some others believed that he had married the Princess of Banapur. I consulted Professor Jayakrushna Mishra of the Oriya Department of Ravenshaw College, who was staying in Athagarh Mess in Budhi Thakurani lane. He told me that Bhanja had chanted *Ramtarak mantra* and was blessed with occult powers. However, I felt that I had not put together material sufficient for writing a biographical play. But the urge to write a play had become irresistible, and I had to write it. I told myself that I was not going to write a historical document but a play celebrating Bhanja's great contribution to Oriya poetry. So, instead of bothering about the accuracy of historical data I should get down to writing the script. In the Preface to the play, I therefore explained: 'A historical play is not history. Historians may excuse me for the way I have modified historical facts.'

I was fully aware that history had recorded nothing about the personal life of the poet; but I feared that I might have committed anachronisms. That is why I wrote the above lines. One day, I nerved myself and went down to Professor Artaballav Mohanty's residence. I handed the script to him, requesting him to go through it and to give his comments. He was then poring over a palm-leaf manuscript. I felt nervous when he looked up at me. He was the only teacher in the college, who could tell even senior students to stand up on the bench if they committed a mistake. Professor Mohanty kept the manuscript; I bowed to him and came back. After a few

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

days, I thought I should meet him and find out what he thought of my play. Since I felt diffident, I took a few more days to muster enough courage before finally going to meet him. At last, one morning I went to his residence. He was in the garden. I stood there for a while. He looked up at me and said, "I've gone through the manuscript. Go in and take it." I asked him, "Are there any mistakes, Sir?" He said, "It's okay. Take my word. It's none other than Artaballav Mohanty saying so. Go on writing." I felt immensely encouraged. The support of elderly persons heartens young writers.

I completed the play, *Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja*, in the first part of 1946. The previous year, Annapurna Theatre had split into two groups: 'A' and 'B'. Annapurna 'A' held performances in Puri under the supervision of Bauribandhu Mohanty. Lingaraj Nanda was the manager of the 'B' group. Somnath Dash was the founder of both the groups. At the initial stage, the two sister groups had an amicable relationship. Even the artists of one group sometimes worked for the other. In 1946, the 'B' group put up its performances in Puri and the 'A' group toured Cuttack and held its shows there. My friends in Annapurna 'A', Bauribandhu Mohanty, in particular, knew that I had written a play entitled, *Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja*. Mohanty showed his eagerness to put the play on stage. I had assured him that I would read it out to him, after I completed it. When the 'A' group came to Cuttack, I read out the scenes to him sitting on the adjoining verandah of the hall. Mohanty and my friends from the theatre world listened to my reading.

Whenever shows ran at the Annapurna 'A', Bauribandhu babu took particular care of how he dressed. At other times, he was careless of his appearance. At times he appeared bare up to his waist and barefooted. He would be wearing only a towel. A gold chain round his neck, big rings on his forefingers glittered. He chain-smoked Gold-flake cigarettes. While listening to my reading, he would go out from time to time and come back. Probably, in his imagination he was adding elements to the play, which would make it a box-office hit.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

One day, when I was reading out the script to Bauri babu and some others, he went off, came back and said, "Listen to me. Bhanja was actually a poet of love. Add an erotically charged scene to the play. This is something the audience would really like." He laughed and then continued, "Show Bhanja writing poetry, surrounded by young beauties. He would be lost in the enjoyment of their company, leaning against one or holding another's hand. Suppose the king suddenly arrived on the scene. What would the poet now do? Wouldn't he hide the women under the bed? Don't you think this would appeal to the audience very much? Someone narrated this story to me when our troupe toured Nayagarh." O God! What could one say to this! Bauri babu looked at me, waiting for my response. I only said, "First let me complete reading the script." I read on. In the middle of my reading, Bauri babu made a few suggestions from a commercial point of view. He offered his advice on how to make the play succeed at the box office and left, not waiting for me to finish. The others kept listening to me. But no discussion could take place, as we were already late for lunch.

I could not blame Bauri babu for his suggestions. Some modifications are generally introduced to make a play commercially successful. However, I did not think it proper to accept the changes he suggested to me in order to make the production a box-office hit. I had to think better of staging the play at Annapurna Theatre. I never went there again to discuss the script. A few months later, Annapurna 'A' group went back to Puri.

I was staying at the residence of Sarada bhai, who was then living in a rented house near Ganesh temple in Cuttack. I usually spent the time watching rehearsals at Roop Mahal theatre in Alamchand Bazar, or wondering around Choudhury Bazar, Kali Temple Lane, Mehendipir, Budhi Thakurani Lane, Mahidas Bazar and its neighbourhood. My relationship with the young men of the locality was extremely cordial. My friends included Shailen Bhattacharya of Budhi Thakurani Lane, Raghunath Dhal Samant who lived opposite Utkal Sahitya

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Press building and Rabi Sahu of Kali temple lane. On holidays, Rabi accompanied me to the bank of river Kathajodi. We exchanged small talk. He had learnt from me that I was writing *Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja.* When he visited me at our residence, I read out different portions of the play to him. He was at the time a regular visitor to Kali babu's Jagannath Ballav residence. When he learnt that I was not interested in putting it up at Annapurna, he suggested that I give the script to Orissa Theatres. While we were taking a walk on the bank of Kathajodi, he said, "Why don't you try Orissa Theatres?

I felt scared. Orissa Theatres? And Kali babu? The incidents of the day I had made him return the script of *Trutiya Drushya* flashed before my eyes. Rabi was aware of that unfortunate incident. He said, reassuring me, "Why recall those days? Kali babu has heard about the play from me. He had told me to ask you to bring him the script."

Kali babu wants me to take the script to him! Perhaps he was looking for a new script. His play, *Abhijan* had been put on stage by July 1946. Gopal Chootray's *Pheria,* Bhanja Kishore Patnaik's *Benami* and Ram Chandra Mishra's *Mulia* had been produced at the Annapurna Theatre the same year. There was fierce competition between Orissa Theatres and Annapurna Theatre. For theatre lovers, Cuttack, then the capital of Orissa, had become a place of pilgrimage.

Visiting theatre halls had become something of a passion on the part of the elite of Cuttack. And those who came to Cuttack on business or other work made a point of going to watch a play. Perhaps Kali babu wanted to write a new play but found it no longer possible on his part to do so. Writing a play was not a mechanical work like typing out a page. Kali babu wanted to stage a play written by someone else. And, perhaps for this reason, he told Rabi to persude me to bring him the script.

One day, I informed Kali babu in advance and went to his house. Beside a room with a thatched roof on the first floor, there was an open space. Sumati, the leading lady artist of Orissa Theatre and who became a famous actress and singer

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

later, lived in the cottage. When I went there, Kali babu was sitting there in a chair, his back to the sun. I touched his feet. He raised his hand, gave his blessings and asked me to take a seat. He said loudly, "Sumati, send us two cups of coffee." Kali babu was fond of coffee. Sipping coffee, he looked up at me and said, "Can one ever disown one's son because he does something wrong?" I was not prepared for a question like this. So I kept quiet. Such a person was Kali babu! He smiled and said, "Read on."

I read out the script. Kali babu listened to me intently, deeply engrossed, his eyes closed. The morning sun was soft and pleasant. Coffee was served from time to time. I felt happy. When I completed my reading and closed the notebook, I looked up at Kali babu's face to guess what he thought of the play. He had not shown any reaction when I was reading out the script to him. Now he said, "We'll ask the pundit to find an auspicious day, on which we can start the rehearsal." Dayanidhi Dash, who was an artist of Orissa Theatres, was known as "the pundit." He played the role of Dhananjaya in the play, *Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja*. I told him that I would soon make a copy of the play and give it to him. I paid my respects to him and took my leave.

The relationship, which had snapped when I had taken back the script of *Trutiya Drushya*, was now re-established. This relationship had continued till Kali babu breathed his last. It grew deeper and more intimate in course of time.

I sometimes went to watch the rehearsals of *Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja*, which were usually held in the morning. There was something special about Kali babu's way of rehearsing a play. He was at once a scholar, poet, dramatist, dance-specialist and musician. He was therefore equipped with exceptional directorial skills. As he had a bad leg, he could not move about on the stage to direct the action through demonstration. He would sit at the centre of the front row of the auditorium, and ask me to sit beside him. And from his seat, Kali babu would say, "Bhola, have you understood the role of Ghaneswar Bhanj properly? He was a drunkard and conspirator, treacherous and

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

suspicious by nature. His tone of voice and his dialogues should reflect these aspects of his personality. Chhanda passed before you, singing a song. Show me again how you should make your entry on the stage."

One day, I was watching the rehearsal, sitting by his side. The rehearsal of Act-I Scene I was going on. In that scene, Dhananjay Bhanj, a poet, the grandfather of Upendra Bhanj, was discussing with Sripati Pandit his grandson's marriage proposal. The dialogue went like this:

> I would like to make the young Upendra a captive of the Blue eyes of Hemamala, the beautiful princess of Banpur.

Kali babu suddenly stopped the rehearsal and said, "Repeat the dialogue and say it loudly." He was in the habit of poking his finger into whoever sat next to him, when he began to say something. He poked into my arm and said, "Tell me if the dialogue sounds all right. I think it sounds rather dull. Some modifications are called for." Finally the dialogue read like this:

> In the blueness of the eyes of beautiful Hemamala, the Princess of Banpur, I would like to imprison my young Upendra.

Now the dialogue seemed better. Kali babu was always of the view that the dialogues should be consistent with the personality of the characters. I realised that using the right word at the right place plays a vital role in drama.

The actors who performed in this play brought distinction to the Oriya stage later. They included Bholanath Das, Choudhury Balaram Das, Bimbadhar Das, Krushna Chandra Rath, Sumati Debi, Binapani Rath and Parul Bala. Bholanath remained close to me till his death. His was a life full of struggle and a spirit of dedication. The world of theatre had absorbed him completely, and he had drawn his whole family into it. After Sumati Devi left the stage, she devoted herself to music, and carved a niche for herself in the world of music in Orissa. Krushna Chandra Rath, after leaving the stage, set himself up

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

as a dealer in costumes and stage properties. Binapani Rath was a new comer and she played the role of Chhanda in *Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanj*. In his autobiography, Kali Charan had this to say on Binapani:

> It was difficult to find an actress who could act as well as sing. But luck decides every thing. A few days ago, a music programme was held at Shriramachandra Bhavan in Cuttack. Ghanashyam Rath, a well-known singer and music teacher from Jastikiri, near Jajpur, had brought a young girl with him to this event. I was impressed with the quality of her voice and her style of singing.
>
> This girl was staying in Sheikh Bazar, Cuttack. When rehearsals for the *Kabi Samrat* were being held. I thought of her and somehow managed to locate her. Her father, Bansidhar Rath, who was a social worker and patriot, was my friend. I gave Binapani a role in the play. She sang beautifully. Later, I let her join Orissa Theatres Ltd. I may mention here that in this play, Sumati performed a dance for the first time. Dr Mayadhar Mansingh inaugurated the play.

Binapani was really gifted with a beautiful voice. The songs in *Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja* she sang while playing the role of Chhanda filled the auditorium with waves of ecstasy. Later, Binapani married my classmate, Lokanath Mishra, who was the son of the famous Oriya poet and political leader, Godabarish Mishra. Mishra later became the Governor of Assam.

Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja was put on stage on 1st February 1947, under the banner of Orissa Theatres. The play ran to a packed house for a few weeks. In March 1947 Orissa Theatres was invited to perform in Karanjia. Until Kalicharan's new play *Raktamati* (The Bloodstained Soil) came to be acted in September, 1947, *Kabisamrat* was staged successfully in different places, and it had not lost its popular appeal and freshness until Orissa Theatres folded up in 1949.

The production was highly acclaimed by Oriya dailies

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

such as the *Samaj* and the *Asha*. The premiere was attended, by eminent writers, painters and poets, who included the Mahant of Emar Math, Pandit Nilakantha Das, the Registrar of Utkal University, Gokul Chandra Satapathy, Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Ananta Prasad Panda, Bidhubhusan Das, Madhusudan Mohanty, and Ananta Patnaik.

The year 1947 was full of pleasant memories for me. The same year, my play *August Na* (The Ninth of August) was staged in Cuttack by Jana Sanskruti Sangha. I had written the first draft of the play soon after the Quit India Movement, but it was incomplete. In 1947, I took it out of the tin trunk in which it had lain neglected, and set to work on fleshing it out. The rehearsal of the play was held on the first floor of the Socialist Party office in Oriya Bazar in Cuttack. At the time, in this house lived Babulal Doshi, and his wife, Santa Behn, whom we used to call 'Behnji.' Babulal was the treasurer of the Socialist Party. Nitai Palit, who directed the play, and played the role of Professor Das, had become my intimate friend. Lest the rehearsal should be discontinued if installments of the script failed to arrive on time, Sarada made a point of collecting those from me on his way back from the college.

Fortunately for us, the problems, which we thought would obstruct the rehearsal, disappeared: three educated girls, Jayanti, Chandramukhi and Amala, who lived in Ranihat, came forward to play the female roles. For the character, Amar, we were looking for someone who should be a handsome, tall, well built young man, of calm disposition, and should have a deep voice which should exude firmness. Nitai Palit and myself found us in the situation of a father looking for a groom for his nubile daughter. I was quite apprehensive that in the absence of the actor who would be convincing in the role of Amar, my attempt to articluate the feelings of people participating in a mass movement like the August Revolution would go in vain. We had little time in our hands, for the 15th of August 1947 was approaching fast. We were eager to stage the play before this date because we wanted to remind people that independence had been achieved through sacrifices made by

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the young. We started the rehearsal although we had not yet found anyone to play Amar. Opposite the Socialist Party office, across the road, lived Atul Ghosh, who was a head assistant in the state Secretariat. One day we saw a tall, healthy young man sitting on the terrace of his one-storey house. His physical appearance we found quite impressive. A thought flashed across my mind: how about getting him to play Amar? I shared my thought with Nitai Palit. Nitai babu, notorious for his quick responses, said, 'No, no. He is a Bengali, after all. He won't be able to pronounce Oriya properly." I smiled and said, "But you, too, are a Bengali. Let us try him out." Nitai babu kept quiet a while, and then said, "All right. I'll call him?" He called out, "Gour, come over here."

Gour came and at that very moment, got caught in the snare of art and has never been able to break himself free. He began by acting on the stage, then he went on to act in films, to direct, and later, to produce them. In this way, the famous Ray Gour Ghosh came to be born. He was ideal for the role of Amar in *August Na*.

The rehearsal went in full swing after Gour was roped in. But there was another problem; we were yet to find someone suitable for playing the British judge. Nitai Palit, Sharada Nayak and myself concluded that, considering what the role demanded, no one other than Babulal Doshi could do it justice. The actor did not have to speak in Oriya at all; he could make do with a few words of Hindi mixed with English. We now approached Babulal. He was shocked. He and acting? I coaxed him, saying, "There will be absolutely no problem. All you have to do is to sit and speak a few lines, which would be written on the files placed before you. You could read these and speak your lines." At that time, Babulal Doshi, who was a hard-boiled socialist, was deeply loyal to his party. So, under the circumstances, he agreed to act. The seed planted in Babulal on that day, in course of time grew into a huge, densely foliaged tree in the field of Orissa's art and culture. Like others, too, Babulal could not extricate himself from the spell the world of art wove around him and he ended up founding the *Kala*

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Vikash Kendra in Cuttack. The Kendra was inaugurated by Dr Pranakrishna Parija on the day of Saraswati Puja in 1948 in Gour's drawing room in the presence of a few friends, who included Babulal, Gour, Sarada, Baikuntha Mohanty, Nakula, Banka Behari Das and myself. I said, welcoming Dr Parija, "No effort which has received your blessings can ever fail. We are confident that this institution, will survive, and flourish for ever." The bye-laws of the Kendra were drafted afterwards. Around this time, I had to leave Cuttack for Delhi to take-up a job there, and, therefore, I could not associate myself with the Kendra in its formative stage.

The play *August Na* was staged at Annapurna Theatre on 11th August 1947. According to the law in force at the time, one had to take the permission of the police before producing a play. Although, British rule had only four days' life left, the police nevertheless deliberately delayed granting us the permission. By now, the hall had been booked, and invitation cards had been sent out. For us, the situation was a tense one; we decided that, whatever the consequence, we would go ahead with staging the play, even if permission was not granted to us. Surendra Dwivedy and others advised the top police officers not to create an unpleasant situation. Good sense prevailed over the police, and on the evening the play was to be acted, permission was given to us.

Many in Cuttack had direct experience of the August Revolution and quite a few had taken part in it. It is they who spread the word about our play, and the hall was packed with people sitting on benches, and standing. The hall rang with the sound of applause. Among the audience were several high officials and policemen. Towards the close of the play, the audience and the actors had become one, and shouted, "Long live the Revolution."

The news of the success of the play on the stage spread like wild fire, and we received invitations from many places to come and stage the play. The play was produced at Puri, Balasore and Salipur. The crowds of people who came to see the play were so huge that police had to be called in to control

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

them. After the play was staged at Salipur, Sharada and Nihar, both of whom acted in the production there, got married. All those associated with the staging of *August Na* established themselves in various fields of life. Baikunthanath Mohanty went on to become an active politician, who got elected to Orissa Assembly from Balikuda. Bhubanananda Das became a distinguished lawyer; Tushar Sen became a doctor and served people. Akshay Mohanty did Orissa proud by rendering exemplary service to the lepers in Satar in Maharastra. Mohd. Rafique rose to become the Director, AIR and Doordarshan and made rich contribution to the art and culture of Orissa. Mihir Sen, who had played the Lawyer in *August Na*, not only became a barrister but also earned great fame by swimming across the English Channel. The play had brought all these gifted people together.

On the 14th of August, my friends and I were present in the tennis court of Ravenshaw College to celebrate India's independence. The frontage of the college building had been decorated with electric bulbs since evening. The flag-post at the top of the building had been lit up in such a manner that even the rope was also clearly visible from the ground. The crowd in the tennis court and on the college road was bigger than the crowd during the Baliyatra fair. Everyone's eyes were fixed on the flag-post, for they were eager to witness the birth of free India. The auspicious hour would come at midnight, the Union Jack would be removed and in its place would be unfurled the national tricolor. Celebrations had already started in the Constituent Assembly in Delhi. The details were announced in a loud speaker. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's inspiring and historic 'Tryst with Destiny' speech on the eve of independence was broadcast. The air rang with the ecstatic slogans of *Bande Mataram*. Late at night, after the celebrations ended, I returned to *Pathachhaya*, tired and worn-out.

I was a student of law of Ravenshaw College at the time. I was Secretary, Drama Society and Sarada was Assistant Secretary of the Society. Professor Ramachandra Mohapatra was the Society's Vice-President. He was a person of calm

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disposition and he had also distinguished himself as a dramatist. Two mythological plays, *Sudama* and *Bilvamangal*, written by him were extremely popular in the countryside. A few weeks before India's independence, all the representatives of the Drama Association were called to Principal S.Roy's office. The Vice President was present there. The meeting had been convened to discuss what cultural programmes should be organised to celebrate the achievement of independence. It was decided to stage a one-hour long play, rather than a conventional variety show, to mark the occasion. Independent India's first Governor of Orissa, Kailashnath Katju was to grace this cultural programme.

As the Secretary of the Drama society, it fell to me to put the play on stage. I said to the Principal, "Sir, we will have women artists in this play. Boys will not play female roles any more". Suddenly a quiet descended on everyone. The unheard-of proposal left the Principal stunned. He asked, "Which girls will act in the play? Who'll take responsibility for them?" "It'll be our responsibility, Sir," Sarada and I replied. Now a heated argument followed. Professor Mohapatra and a few other teachers supported the Principal. I grew excited and said, "Sir, This is strange. On the 15th of August a new India will have taken birth. The thought that in the new India, boys will act female roles wearing wigs, sarees and bangles is simply not acceptable." My words shocked and upset the Principal. Maybe, he was worried what would happen if the first programme of the Governor in the College went wrong. Our teachers tried to prevail upon us by explaining what would happen if we stuck to our point. But we remained adamant. After a lot of discussion, a way out was found. The Principal permitted us to have women artists in our play. However, it was decided that only girls would perform the play. Anyway, our plan to bring Oriya women on stage did succeed. The next year, girls went a step further. In Ravenshaw and other colleges, girls acted alongside boys in plays. A new tradition was thus inaugurated in Orissa.

On the 15th of August, in presence of the Governor Katju,

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girls in the college staged a play 'Cabinet Mission' written by the radical young writer, Manmohan Mishra. The play depicted the arrival of the British in India, the way they exploited the country and spread their empire and how they had to leave. The production was a great success, and in it girls had played male roles. I got the costume from Raghu Marwari's shop in Balu Bazar, and the make-up artists were Sarkar brothers. As per the Principal's orders, the green room was out of bounds for all except the Vice-President, the Sarkar brothers, Bidhubahusan Das, myself, Sarada and a few canteen attendants and workers. Among those who took part in the play were Nandini Satapathy (nee Panigrahi), Prabhat Nalini Das, Mahamaya and Jogamay Patnaik, and Dipti Mohanty. All of them later occupied high positions.

After all these exciting events—the staging of *August Na*, the celebration of independence, the college drama—routine once more came to dominate my life. Going to office, returning home, and visiting Nitai Palit's house or having fun with friends at Gopal Ghosh's Victoria Medical Hall. And going to office again the next day. This summed up my life. One day, while busy at work in my office, I received a message from the Prime Minister of Orissa that I should go and meet him immediately. At the time Harekrushna Mahtab was the Prime Minister of the state. When I met him, he asked, 'Will you go to Delhi? The AIR office has been opened at Madhupur Kothi in Cuttack. Go and meet Mr. Luthra there." The AIR in Cuttack was inaugurated on 28th January 1948. A studio had been set up at Madhupur Kothi for this purpose, and a one-kilowatt transmitter had been installed there. Mr. Luthra was placed in charge of the station. I called on him the next day. I was told that news in Oriya was to be broadcast in Delhi and relayed from the Cuttack Radio Station. So, for the Oriya unit at Delhi, staff was to be recruited. A written examination for the post of sub-editor was to be conducted two days later. Mr. Luthra said that I could sit for this test if I wanted the job. I sat for the written test, for which many candidates had appeared. Two among them remain in my memory: Mahesh Mohapatra and

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Paramananda Mohanty. 'Dhurjati', the pseudonym under which Mahesh wrote, is quite well known. Paramananda Mohanty rose to occupy a high position in the Public Relations Department in Orissa and also earned fame as a writer. I was selected and was immediately given a job in the News Service Division in Delhi. I travelled third class by train to Delhi. My first journey to Delhi was a memorable one. My father had come all the way from Kujang to see me off at the station. Even after the train had started pulling out of the station, he ran beside my compartment and blessed me putting his hand through the window on my head.

The next day, at sunrise, the train reached West Bengal, Beyond the green rice-fields that stretched on either side of the tracks lay villages. I looked out of the window at the dew-soaked rice-fields. I noticed something strange: in every village people had gathered at its outskirts, conches were being blown and the places were decked out with leaves and coloured paper. I realised that it was 23rd January and the villagers were spontaneously celebrating Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's birthday. Subhash was a student of Ravenshaw Collegiate School at Cuttack, and had nursed cholera patients there during an epidemic. I heard a lot of stories about him from his childhood friend Purno Bose, who owned Tripti Hotel opposite Gourishankar Park in Cuttack. After becoming the President of the Congress Party, Bose had visited Cuttack. He made a point of going to meet the old woman from whom he used to buy savouries in his childhood. Later, we recorded an interview with that old woman and broadcast it from Cuttack Radio Station.

I knew no one in Delhi at the time. There were then very few Oriyas there. Only a few Oriyas occupied high positions in the Secretariat and there were some Oriyas who were in the defence services. Compared with other linguistic groups, Oriyas did not have much of a presence in Delhi. Some Oriya members of the Constituent Assembly lived in temporary accommodation in the capital city. Lakhminarayan Sahu of Servants of India Society was a member of the Constituent

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Assembly. In a bungalow in Ferozeshah Road stayed Nanda Kishore Das—he became the Speaker of Orissa Legislative Assembly later—and Biswanath Das, who later become Orissa's Chief Minister. A large number of Oriya plumbers and petty contractors lived in Delhi at the time. Oriya plumbers exercised a monopoly in undivided India. Most of them came from Pattamundai and Kendrapara in Orissa. Although many of them had to return home during the partition riots, Oriya plumbers nevertheless continued to dominate the profession.

Delhi was not such a large city at that time. Old Delhi with its crowded lanes and bylanes put one in the mind of Cuttack. Many of the lanes were narrow and dirty. But, New Delhi was spacious, and full of beautiful government buildings, properly laid out wide roads lined with gulmohur trees. Government quarters were set apart from each other. All these combined to give Delhi an aristocratic ambience.

Delhi then was called the city of cycles. The roads were thronged with bikes when the offices opened, and when they closed for the day. Very few then owned motor cars. For transport, people depended on bikes and horse cabs. One bike often carried as many as four or five persons, sometimes an entire family consisting of old men, old women, adults and children. It was not uncommon to see people walking along the road carrying a four-poster on their heads. There were a lot of donkeys in Delhi at the time; these were used not only by washermen to carry the clothes; they were sometimes used to carry house-building materials and children as well.

When I arrived in Delhi, it was slowly changing as a result of the partition. Countless wounded, scared and desperate Hindus and Sikhs were pouring into the streets of the city. Having lost everything, they had become refugees in their homeland. They took shelter wherever they could. After making *chapatis* on their pans under the open sky they would hang their pots on a bamboo stake. By the time I reached Delhi, violence had subsided there, and communal tension had abated. However, the deep wounds left in the psyche of the inhabitants of Delhi had not yet healed, and the ordeal of the

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refugees had not come to an end. For several days I used to come across families living in a tent under the Minto Bridge on my way to the office. Later, it seemed to me, they made alternative arrangements and moved out of the place.

I had decided to leave for Delhi, acting on an impulse; but I had made no arrangements for staying there. I had written to one Krushna Chandra Palai, a complete stranger, who worked as Chief Lino Operator in *The Statesman*, requesting him to see about my accommodation in Delhi. I received a reply by return of post, which said; "Got your letter. Don't worry. Take a horse-cab from Old Delhi station and come to my residence in the Press Lane. I'll leave the keys with my neighbour in case I go out. More when we meet Yours, Palai babu."

I left Calcutta by Toofan Mail in which there was no provision for reserving berths in the lower class those days. As I sat leaning against the window of the third-class compartment, thoughts of home crowded my mind. I remembered the friends I had left behind at Cuttack and the warmth and intimacy of the theatre world in Cuttack.

When the train journey ended, I took a horse-cab and went to Palai babu's residence at 38, Press Lane in Delhi. The need for collecting the keys from the neighbours did not arise, for Palai babu had taken leave from his office and was waiting for me. Palai babu was an exceptionally kind and affectionate person. He rolled out my holdall on a four-poster and put a bucket of hot water in the bathroom, saying, "It's extremely cold here. Never take your bath in cold water. Leave the clothes you wore during your journey in the bathroom. I'll wash them tomorrow." I had a wash and came to him. He had made tea in the mean time and was buttering slices of bread for me. I was eager to fall into talk with him, but he told me, "First take your tea. It'll warm you up." He made me eat five or six slices of bread. Now I asked him, "Where have you made arrangements for my stay in Delhi?" "Where else? You'll stay with me, here. You're new to Delhi, after all. You'll have difficulties if you stay on your own." He pointed at the houses across the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

lane and said, "I and a friend of mine, Sukadev used to stay in one of those one-room houses. I was looking for a bigger house when I heard that you were coming to Delhi. You can get everything in Delhi, but not a place to stay. You must have seen how the refugees live by the way side. However, I was lucky. I found this two-room house. This lay unoccupied after the riot. Now it has been allotted to a young man from our part of Orissa. He is an office attendant in the Government office. He stays here and cooks for us. Sukadev and I will sleep in that room. You'll sleep here. You'll have no inconvenience here. Don't feel shy. Please feel free to let me know if you need anything."

I was nervous when I had first set foot on the Old Delhi railway station. Now Palai babu's words brought me relief. I looked about the house. Indeed it had been recently occupied. The paint on the walls was still wet in places. My eyes were drawn to one of the walls on which the coat of lime had not completely erased a line. Palai babu explained, "We occupied the house in a hurry. CPWD workers have not done a good job of the white-washing. You are looking at the marks on the wall. When we unlocked the door, we saw scrolled on the wall—'Written in the blood of...' During the riot, people belonging to one community had killed a person belonging to another and had written his name with a shoe-brush dipped in his blood."

The ghastly incidents, which had taken place in Delhi, were still fresh in the minds of the people. One day someone pointed at a place near Connaught Circus to me, saying, "One day, while being driven through this, Nehru saw a few persons, armed with swords and weapons, chasing a man. Nehru burst through the security cordon, snatched away the sword from the assailant's hand and saved the man's life." By the time I reached Delhi, peace had already descended on the city, thanks to the passionate sincerity of Nehru and the rock-like firmness of Sardar Patel.

There was the difference of heaven and hell between the work at the News Service Division of All India Radio and

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Orissa Secretariat. In the latter, people gossipped most of the time; most of the assistants thought that their day's work was done once they signed the attendance register and scribbled on a couple of files. But at the All India Radio station, there was hardly any leisure. Since the News Service in Oriya had just been set up and I was the first to join there, the pressure of work on me at the initial stage was extremely heavy.

A radio station of one-Kilowatt capacity was set up at Cuttack; it was inaugurated on January 28, 1948. The Oriya news broadcast in Delhi was relayed from the Cuttack station from that day. During the first few days, I was responsible for preparing the text of the news and reading it out.

News bulletins in English, Hindi and in most of the Indian languages and a few foreign ones were broadcast from Delhi. The general newsroom was open twenty-four hours a day, where master bulletins were prepared at regular intervals. Those bulletins were translated into different languages, which were then broadcast according to the timings of the language bulletins.

The experience of my first broadcast has remained indelibly etched in my memory. I reached the studio with the news bulletin I had prepared and looked at the wall clock without batting my eyelids. I was excited, and nervous. I thought that there would be celebrations in Cuttack at that very moment. People in villages must have switched on their radio sets, eagerly waiting to listen to the first news bulletin in Oriya. The red light came on at 7.15 P.M. It was time for the broadcast of Oriya bulletin. I spoke over the microphone: *"Akashvani... khabar padhuchhanti Manoranjan Das. Ajira Mukhya sambad heuchhi* ... (This is the All India Radio. The news read by Manoranjan Das. The headlines are... etc.)

I stopped exactly after fifteen minutes and closed the feeder. The red light was off. As I picked up the sheets of paper, I felt satisfied that the reading on the first day had gone off pretty well.

Prabhat Mukherjee, the Assistant Director of the News Service Division, who co-ordinated the work of the language

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

units, now entered the studio. He was a handsome, smart, sportive and amiable person. His wife, Arundhati Mukherjee was an eminent Bengali film actress. He himself was also a reputed artist. Prabhat babu said, "Bravo, Bravo, Excellent. The first blow is half the battle. Everything will run smoothly along the grooves. You'll get used to it quickly."

I felt relaxed and came out with Prabhat babu. But before the reading of news became a matter of routine for me, something took place, which I can never ever put out of my mind. One day I came to the radio station a little early and started translating the news bulletin. Prabhat babu arrived at 4 P.M. and found that the translation work had made considerable progress. He said, "It seems you have started early today." I said, "I would like to go to Gandhiji's prayer meeting at Birla Bhavan with Mr Doshi of the Gujarati unit. I promise, I shall come back in time." Prabhat babu smiled and said, "Are you mad? You cannot go today. Afterwards, when others join the unit, you can go. Well, I shall take you there one day." Actually three persons are needed to prepare the evening bulletin. But I was the only person working there. Prabhat babu was afraid. I might not be able to come back in time. He did not want to take a risk by allowing me to go out. My face fell. Prabhat babu could sense my disappointment. In order to cheer me up, he said, "Won't we have tea today?" Then he phoned the canteen, "Listen, four non-veg. cutlets and one pot of tea. Yes, send an extra cup. Bill it to the account of Prabhat Mukherjee. Send these over to the Oriya unit."

Cutlets and tea were brought in after a little while. Bibhuti Das of the Bengali unit joined us. Shortly afterwards, Prabhat babu left, saying, "I'll join you in the studio at 7.12 P.M."

The cold evening of the 30th of January was getting darker. The mercury was dipping rapidly. My colleagues of the Bengali unit and I pulled the room heaters towards our feet and busied ourselves with work. Suddenly we heard a noise on the verandah. People from different units came rushing out onto the verandah and started running towards the GNR (General News Room). Someone in some room had

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

broken a terrible news. We all ran to check if it was true. The GNR was thronged with people.

The teleprinter flashed the news that the Father of the Nation had been assassinated near the prayer platform of Birla House. In a moment, a deadly quiet descended on the AIR premises. All kinds of fears and apprehensions began to agitate the mind. In that pale twilight I retraced my steps to the Oriya unit. Prabhat babu was already there. The smile on his face had faded. He said, his voice full of worry, "Whatever you translated for today, put it on the hold. A new bulletin on Gandhi's assassination will have to be prepared." I looked up at the wall-clock. There was hardly 30-40 minutes left. It seemed impossible to translate into Oriya a news bulletin of 15 minutes duration in English. However, circumstances made the impossible possible. It was a challenge for Prabhat babu and myself.

By this time, the master bulletin in English had started arriving in instalments. Prabhat babu said, "It won't do if you translate as you read the text. I'll read out the English master bulletin slowly to you. You translate it and write out the Oriya bulletin."

That was how we went about our job. He read out the master bulletin slowly and, translating it, I wrote out the Oriya bulletin. It was a race against time. At last, the bulletin got written. There were only three minutes to go before it would be quarter past seven. In the control room, people were beginning to panic over our absence. The bulletin in hand, we ran down the corridor towards the studio. From the control room, an engineer came running towards us. We ran into each other on the way, but we had no time to exchange words. Seeing us, the engineer turned back and rushed towards the control room. Gasping for breath, the two of us at last reached the control room. There were only 20 seconds left. Prabhat babu stood by my side and signalled to the control room that we were ready. The staff in the control room were also prepared, I read the news at 7.15 PM.: "We are grieved to inform you, the Father of the Nation has been assassinated..." Prabhat babu handed

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the newssheets to me, which I went on reading out.

I finished. Prabhat babu left the room on some other work. I sat in the studio, silent and motionless.

I arranged the newssheets serially and went down to the duty room. The entire atmosphere was heavy with grief. I filled up the logbook and proceeded to the Oriya unit through the general newsroom. I noticed something unusual as I passed along the corridor. The Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was walking towards the studio, a baton in hand. I do not remember if there was a rose on his sherwani. A couple of officers accompanied him. He walked mechanically, like a puppet. He and the officers walked past me and entered the studio. I and one or two others followed them. Pandit Nehru sat in a chair, in front of the microphone and started addressing the nation. We watched him for some time in an anteroom, which was separated from the studio by a large glass partition. After a moment, we went to the control room to listen to what Nehru had said.

> The light has gone out of our lives, and there is darkness everywhere and I don't know what to tell you and how to say it...

I had the rare opportunity of spending a few minutes watching Nehru from close quarters. I can never forget the sadness that clouded his face that day.

A few minutes after Nehru finished his speech, the Home Minister of India, Sardar Ballavbhai Patel, came to the studio. There was on his face a totally different expression. Unlike Nehru, Patel looked firm and grave. The Iron Man of India entered the studio with heavy footsteps. A few officers of the All India Radio followed him.

The cold winter evening of the 30th of January advanced. Incidents took place in rapid succession. I stood at the main door of the All India Radio and thought how I would return home. Moreover, I would have to pass by the side of the Police Station in Parliament Street. The assassin had been lodged there. Suddenly Prabhat babu came and said, "I'm searching

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

for you. Let's prepare a documentary on Gandhiji's assassination. We'll send the disc to Cuttack station tomorrow. The staff car will drop you in the Press Lane. So don't worry about getting late."

I was tired and my feet were not ready to carry me. Still I felt inspired, and both of us—Prabhat babu and myself—set to work. He prepared the script, which I translated into Oriya. I also lent my voice. Those days voices were not recorded on cassettes, but on discs. It was late by the time we finished. The staff car dropped me at my residence. Palai babu was waiting for me. He opened the door and said, "You had to work hard today, hadn't you?"

"It was not merely hard work; it was a heavy and painful duty. The entire country is mourning. But my case is a bit different. I'll regret something for the rest of my life."

Palai babu asked, "Why, what's the matter?" I said, "Had not Prabhat babu detained me, I would have attended Gandhiji's prayer meeting today at Birla Bhavan. I could have had a glimpse of the great man on the last day of his life. But I was unlucky. I could not go."

Palai babu agreed with me. We looked at each other in pain and anguish.

Five or six months before I left for Delhi, Orissa Theatres put up shows of *Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja* intermittently. I was staying at Sarada bhai's residence at Kaligali. One day, his wife said to me, "Mini and his sisters have not seen your play. Take them to the show one of these days." Mini was a college student, who occasionally visited my sister-in-law. I felt too shy to talk to her. Whenever we chanced upon each other, we lowered our eyes. That was as far as our relationship went.

I made a request to Kali babu and got a few seats reserved in the front row on a Sunday. I sat close to the two sisters. This was perhaps the first time I sat so close to a young woman. My conversation with Mini never went beyond "yes" and "no." Whenever I looked straight at her face, it turned red out of shyness. For the first time, the idea of marriage

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

crossed my mind. Sometimes I thought, what about marrying this girl?

The show went on, scene after scene. Suddenly, the gatekeeper came and whispered to me, "Your uncle is waiting for you." I told Mini that I would be back in a minute, and came out of the auditorium.

Banambar uncle was waiting for me outside. He took me aside and said, "I had written to Arta bhai. He has replied. He says that the decision is yours. He would agree to whatever you say." I was puzzled. Banambar uncle explained, "Gopal babu has brought a marriage proposal. Don't you know Gopal babu of village Urali, who is now the court officer in Kendrapara? His eldest daughter is a good and beautiful girl. We know her since her childhood. I think it would be good match. After I find out your views, I shall call Arta bhai from Kujang and settle the matter."

My views! I felt as if I fell from the sky. I had never heard of my marriage proposal. And suddenly this, when for the first time in my life I was sitting close to a girl in the auditorium to watch a play! I could not make up my mind. I tried to locate Gopal babu. Was she related to Akshay and Braja, who had grown close to me when *August Na* was staged? I tried to recall—Akshay's father was Gobind Chandra Mohanty. Gopal babu was Braja's father. Their village lay near Cuttack, on the other side of the Kathajodi. Probably he was the same Gopal babu.

When I kept quiet, uncle said, "If you like, you can see the girl. The marriage will be settled only after you say 'yes'. Tell me, if you want to see the girl. I shall ask Gopal babu to send his daughter Kusuma to Gobind babu's residence in Cuttack. But tell me, do you wish to see the girl?" It was a crucial moment for me. My future depended on my decision.

I thought I would tell my uncle about Mini. Arguments and counter-arguments flashed across my mind at the speed of lightning. Then I thought, why Mini? We had not yet fallen in love. For me, she was almost a stranger, like the unknown girl, Kusum. When a young man falls in love with a young

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

woman, of course they should marry. But it was a different matter altogether if one was drawn to the other without knowing one's mind. In such a case, the decision of the elders should prevail. I said, "I've nothing to say. I am willing to marry the girl you elders have chosen for me." Uncle asked me, "Do you want to see Kusum?" I thought there would be no need to. If one could fall in love first and marry later, it was also possible to marry first and fall in love with one's wife or husband later. Probably I was destined to marry first and then fall in love with the girl I would marry. I said, "You have seen her. Why should I go to see her?" He said, "I'm going to write to Arta bhai about this tomorrow" and left. I left for Delhi a few months after this incident.

I spent the first few months in Delhi amidst excitement and preoccupations. Gradually, however, I came to experience the harsher side to metropolitan life. It was almost impossible to find a rented accommodation there. Palai babu tried hard to look for a house for me, but in vain. I received a letter from my father, who wrote, "The marriage will take place in the month of May. Find accommodation, so that you can take your wife with you." It was extremely difficult to find a house on rent. It was also impossible to get government accommodation. In the mean time, the employees of the Assamese unit, which had been opened alongwith the Oriya unit, had been allotted quarters in Lodhi area on an out-of-turn basis. The Prime Minister of Assam, Mr. Bardoloi, had made a request to the Union Home Minister on their behalf. One day, my friends of the Assamese unit said, "Don't you know any minister from Orissa?" I replied, "I know almost all of them, even the Prime Minister of Orissa. A few members of the Constituent Assembly knew me well. Most of the days, after reading the news bulletin, I used to return to our residence by way of 16D, Ferozeshah Road. Two members of the Constituent Assembly, Biswanath Das and Nanda Kishore Das, both from Orissa, live there. Other leaders visited them regularly. The Prime Minister of Orissa, Mahtab stays with them, whenever he visits Delhi. I meet all these leaders there." I boasted, in one breath,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

of my acquaintance with so many leaders. My Assamese friends said, "What's your problem then? If anyone of them speaks to the Home Minister or puts in a word to someone in the Ministry, you'll certainly be allotted a house." But that was not to be. No one came to my help: all the same, Palai babu and I myself tried very hard to find accommodation. We had not yet succeeded in finding one even when I came to Orissa to get married.

In May 1948, I married Kusum, daughter of Gopal Charan Mohanty. I had a glimpse of the bride on the marriage altar. Her hand was placed on mine on the sacred *kalash*. Her jeweled *champak*-yellow fingers looked still more beautiful as they had been washed with water mixed with turmeric. The first touch of an unknown young woman before the sacred fire amidst the chanting of hymns gave me a new sensation. I felt as if our two souls had become one. After the marriage, I spent a few days in Kujang before leaving for Delhi.

The initial excitement of getting a job in Delhi quickly abated after spending a few months in the city. I now felt deeply homesick. Of course it was, but natural that I should think of my wife. I also remembered the theatre world in Cuttack, the rehearsals in evenings, the acting on the stage and the words of the artists of Annapurna Theatre. "When are you giving us a new script?" My mind often returned to Cuttack. Just when I was beginning to set myself up as a playwright, I had to leave Cuttack. Many questions confronted me when I got cut off from the world of theatre. Can I maintain my links with Oriya stage, if I stay in Delhi permanently? Can I write plays any more? It is not possible to write plays once one moves away from the stage. If I lived in Delhi permanently, it would not be possible on my part to write plays and get them performed in Delhi.

All these questions left me deeply perturbed. I often felt helpless. When I was passing through this crisis, one day the Deputy Director of the News Service Division, Mr Vannot called me and said, "You will have to appear at a written examination again for the post of Sub-editor of the Oriya news

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

section." I objected, "I have been selected after appearing at one in Cuttack. Why another examination?" Mr Vannot said rudely, "If you won't appear at the examination, someone else will be appointed as Sub-editor, and you'll be given a casual contract to read the news." I lost my temper. I protested, "The letter of appointment given to me by Mr. Luthra, the A.S.D. at Cuttack clearly indicated that I had been appointed as Sub-editor. Moreover, after I managed the section for so many months, why should I sit for a test now?" Mr. Vannot got annoyed. He shouted, "I don't want to argue with you. This is the decision of the Directorate."

I was stunned. I came away from Mr. Vannot's chamber. I narrated the incident to Prabhat babu, who had been transferred from the news to the programme section. He felt sorry for me and said, "Don't appear at the test. You know Vannot well and can easily guess the result." In spite of his advice, I appeared at the test. I had my own reasons for doing so. I dared not enter a period of uncertainty, losing a job carrying a handsome salary. The inevitable happened. The two of us, who were already there, myself and Srimanta Panda, appeared at the test. It was I who was not selected. Mr Vannot himself and one of his colleagues had conducted the test. Later, I came to know that Vannot had visited Cuttack to find candidates to fill up the vacancies. The guardians of a few candidates had taken special care of him during his stay in Cuttack. He had been persuaded to favour some candidates by some influential persons. So he had to get rid of one of the two Sub-editors working in the section. I was made a scapegoat.

It was insulting on my part to work on casual contract in the same unit, which I once headed. I returned to Cuttack licking a wounded ego.

Later on, I had occasions to remember Vannot twice. I remembered him when I joined the All India Radio for the second time. The wheel of my fate brought me to the radio station at Cuttack, when the regional news section opened in 1958. I joined the section as its first news Sub-editor. My mind returned to the time when Vannot had insulted me in his

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

chamber. I remembered the incident once again after I retired from the All India Radio. I received a letter from the Joint Secretary, Department of Information and Broadcasting in July 1984. The letter brought me great joy. All India Radio had not forgotten me after my retirement. I had been made a Producer Emeritus for the Akashvani and Doordarshan. I was the first from Orissa to be thus honoured.

I came to stay in Kujang after I came back from Delhi. I now got an opportunity to write plays, both for the stage and for the screen. I thought I should write another play before doing anything else. That would at least assuage the pain tormenting my heart. The feelings of inferiority and helplessness, which Oriyas suffered from, even after the attainment of Independence, had not escaped my notice. To help them get rid of it, I resolved to write a play woven round a glorious event in the history of Orissa.

The Paika Uprising, which is arguably the first struggle for freedom and which took place in Orissa during 1803-17, came to my mind again and again. The uprising led by Buxi Jagabandhu was a bloody struggle against British rule. I felt that a play based on the uprising should arouse patriotic sentiments and inspire young Oriyas.

As soon as I reached Orissa, I started collecting historical data on the Paika Uprising. But even basic information on the Uprising proved difficult to obtain. A detailed account of the historical incidents and locations was not available in any book. I failed to find a book dealing exhaustively with the social background, economic conditions and manners of early nineteenth century. I consulted historians, scholars and litterateurs, but they could not point to any sources from which I could get the information. Probably, a detailed account of the period had not been written down. Only the District Gazetteer of Puri provided me with a little information. A few incidents and the names of some persons were recorded here and there in the Gazetteer. Jagabandhu Singh's *Prachin Utkal* was of some use to me. I also had to depend on the popular legends on the Uprising. I wove all these elements into a story and constructed

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the plot of a play, which gave a clarion call to the youth to set the country free from the foreign yoke. Buxi Jagabandhu was the focal point of the play.

Initially, the play had been entitled *Bidrohi Jagabandhu.* It had been performed at the Annapurna Theatre under this title. Later, the play was renamed, *Buxi Jagabandhu,* and the published book bore this title. The play became popular under this new title. I had written a part of the play in Kujang, and a part in Cuttack. The original building on the Bardhaman compound was in a dilapidated condition when I wrote the play there. In the night, I used to go to this nearby building, which housed Utkal University those days. Electric lamps lit up the wide verandah of the building, where I used to write. I had the habit of reading the dialogues aloud, for which the verandah was the right place. One day, I lay down on a poster and read aloud the portion of the play, which reflected the fear of the employees of the British Government when Jayee Rajguru, the Minister of the Gajapati King, was going to be hanged.

Krushnachandra	: Charan, do soldiers guard the whole place?
Charan	: There is no gap left even for the ants to slip through.
Krushnachandra	: Don't be complacent, Charan. Go and supervise everything yourself. You have no idea how brave these people are. If a mob gathers and rushes in here...
Charan	: Don't worry, Sir. I'm going to see to everything myself.

It was about nine or ten at night. Suddenly I heard the shouts of the Gurkha darwan. In the semi-darkness, I noticed him approaching me, *a bhujali* in hand. "Please go away. Leave the place. There is a wolf moving about". I also saw a wolf running away at a distance of only a couple of yards from the verandah. Those days, the area surrounding the railway station was almost a jungle.

I found Kujang a congenial place for writing. My mother

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was very happy when I returned from Delhi and devoted myself to writing. My father did not mind my giving up the job. He was a man apart. He never interfered with whatever I did. My wife was also very happy that I had come back home. She had not been old enough to entertain very clear ideas about good and bad, and the present and the future. From the beginning, she felt drawn towards my writing, and she was a source of inspiration to me.

An interesting incident took place when I was writing *Buxi Jagabandhu*. My wife brought a letter for me, handed it to me and stood by my side to learn what it said. I opened the envelope. The letter was written on blue paper. It was from Sumitra in Delhi, and it was her first letter to me. Memories, which had been erased from my mind, re-surfaced as I went through it. She wrote, "I never expected that you would leave Delhi so soon. I could not believe you when you told me that you were leaving. I feel very bad after you left. I cannot go out with others. I've begun working at my studies. I've to buy a few books and am waiting for the money order. Please tell my brother how one is inconvenienced when one doesn't receive money on time."

I got through the letter and passed it to my wife. She read it and asked me before finishing it, "Who is this Sumitra?"

I replied, "Read it to the end."

Her face reddened as she went on reading the letter. As if all her blood had rushed to her face. She repeated the same question, "Who is Sumitra?"

I said, "She is a girl from Orissa. Only a few months ago, after our marriage, Sumitra had gone to Delhi for her studies." I stopped writing the play for a moment, and told her all about Sumitra.

A few months after my marriage, I received a postcard sent to my address in the Press Lane in Delhi. It had come from one of my well wishers, who was a few years senior to me. The letter said: "I and my younger sister, Sumitra, will reach Delhi by Toofan Express the coming Sunday. We are new to Delhi. Sumitra will study there. She will stay in the hostel.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

We'll need to stay somewhere before she gets herself admitted to the college. Please come to the station, and make arrangements for our stay. After she shifts to the hostel, I'll stay with you for a few days before I return to Cuttack." I was worried. I could not decide where to make arrangements for their stay in Delhi. I showed the letter to Palai babu, who assured me that he would do something about it. The next day he arranged for them to stay in a room in the bungalow of Nanda Kishore Das in Ferozeshah Road.

I went to the Old Delhi railway station on Sunday. The train arrived. The platform was crowded and it was difficult to spot them. They had not written where exactly they would wait for me, on the platform or in the waiting room. I tried to look at every compartment. My eyes rested on one compartment in which a young lady was sitting, her elbow resting on the window. I could only glimpse her profile through the compartment window. I had not seen Sumitra earlier. It would have been difficult to recognise her even if I had seen her face. Somehow I felt that she must be Sumitra. I walked down the platform, keeping pace with the moving train. As soon as the train came to a halt, Sumitra and her brother got down. Her brother was Sarada bhai's classmate. He said, "How could you know we were travelling in this compartment? I forgot to write to you to wait for us in the waiting room." I replied playfully, "I've acquired a knowledge of Astrology in the mean time. I could foresee that you'll be travelling in this compartment." He burst into laughter. We took a horse-cab and proceeded to Ferozeshah Road.

My wife was listening to me intently. I went on. After a couple of days, Sumitra was admitted to the college and to the hostel. Before leaving Delhi her brother said, "See, Sumi has never stayed out of Cuttack. Do help her, if she does not receive money from home on time."

One day, she rang me. The friend in the Oriya unit of All India Radio, who picked up the receiver, said to me, "It's for you. A lady..." First, I could not make out who she might be. It was Sumitra. She pleaded, "Please meet me on your way

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

back." When I went to her, she handed a list to me, saying, "I need these books urgently. I have not received money from home yet. I was at a loss. So I called you."

On another occasion, I received a post card from her: "I need these things. I'm not in a position to go to the market. I shall get into difficulties if you do not bring me these. It is embarrassing to borrow from others here." I had no alternative but to do what she asked me to do. Once she said, "I feel bored on Saturdays and Sundays. Please take me to a matinee show." I had to oblige her. She continued to make demands on me. It is very difficult ignore the request of a woman, especially if the request happen to be an earnest one. Although her dependence on me sometimes inconvenienced me, I would never let her know my difficulties. My male ego prevented me from doing so.

The expression on my wife's face became gradually normal. The problems a single girl must be facing while away from her home excited her sympathy. "Poor girl," she said.

Things became easier after this. My wife never looked upon my closeness with Sumitra with suspicion. In fact, if Sumitra needed some help, my wife extended it to her even without my knowledge.

Three or four years later, after completing her studies in Delhi, Sumitra returned to Orissa. She lived in Cuttack during the early years of her service career. We met frequently till I joined All India Radio. I had plenty of time then, and I spent my leisure gossipping with her. She talked to me about her future plans, what might happen to her and what might not. She talked frankly about her feelings to me. I got a chance to enter into the secrets of the mind of an unmarried young woman, who had just passed the prime of her life. All these greatly helped me later when I sought to explore the feminine psyche in my plays. Without my knowledge Sumitra had become a part of a few characters in my plays. She left Cuttack a few days after I joined the All India Radio. The letter, which I received from her while writing the play, *Buxi Jagabandhu* brought her vividly to my mind. I fondly remember our days

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

of guiltless intimacy.

Professor Sadasiva Misra, who taught us Economics, used to say, "What is the use of a stud without a collar? What is the use of a shoe without a lace?" I remembered his words more and more, as I went on writing the play. I wondered, what's the use of writing a script, if it cannot be staged? I was eager to put it on stage as soon as possible.

By this time, Orissa Theatres had disintegrated. Annapurna Theatre had been divided into two groups, A and B. Group A was performing its plays in Cuttack. Although the opinion I formed about commercial theatre while reading out the play *Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja* to Bauribandhu babu remained by and large unchanged, I was aware of the fact that only he could successfully produce a play like *Buxi Jagabandhu*, which is heavily dependent on costume. I wrote to him from Kujang, saying that I would meet him in Cuttack after I finished the script. The secret of his success lay in taking risks. The reply came, "Come to Cuttack as soon as you finish the script."

I finished writing the play and came to Cuttack. But this time, it was not necessary to read out the whole play. Only the scene in which Kasturi poisoned Captain Thomas was read out:

Thomas : You nautch girl, you gave me poison. My men, at arms, carry on till you finish the enemy.
(His voice gets choked)

Kasturi : You are undone, Sahib. This is the outcome of kissing the hand of an Oriya girl. This is Buxi's poison. Buxi had smeared this hand with poison.
(Kasturi bursts into laughter)

Manager Bauribandhu babu was deeply impressed. His satisfaction was evident from his smile. Mohan babu, who later took over the management of Annapurna 'A' group, was also present. Bauribandhu babu told him, "Take the script from Manoranjan babu and keep it with you. Find an auspicious

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

date and start the rehearsal." Bauribandhu babu's decision was final. The rehearsal started. An agreement was signed. It read as follows:

> On this day, the 29th of March 1949, I accept the script *Bidrohi Jagabandhu* by Manoranjan Das and promise to put it on stage at Annapurna Theatre, Group A. I promise to pay him a sum of Rs 251/- (Rupees Two hundred fifty one only) towards his remuneration. I also promise to pay him one night's collections from the counter in the first week as writer's charity.
>
> Bauribandhu Mohanty
> Manager, Annapurna Theatre,
> Group A

I came back to Kujang after the agreement was signed.

An untoward incident took place when I was writing the play *Bidrohi Jagabandhu*. The opening scene of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* centres on the appearance of a ghost. Two soldiers, Bernardo and Marcellus, on two consecutive nights while guarding the Elsinore fort, see a ghost. But Horatio, the friend of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, does not credit their story. Horatio describes it as a figment of their imagination. The next night two guards bring along Horatio with them to witness the scene. As on the two previous nights, the ghost appears. Horatio recognises it: it is the ghost of the King of Denmark, Prince Hamlet's father. He had been laid in the grave in the dress he had put on during his Norwegian campaign. The ghost appears wearing the same dress. Horatio wants to speak to the ghost, but it melts away.

I am not sure if ghosts actually exist. But I was so much involved in such an incident that it was not possible on my part to forget it. It was an incident, which went beyond all belief and disbelief.

Golak Bihari Das had joined Kujang Co-operative Bank a few days previously. He was staying in the Bank quarters, quite close to our residence. He was a close family friend. He was the son-in-law of Maguni Charan Kanungo, a well-known

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

freedom fighter, and the Treasurer and *de facto* Manager of Swaraj Ashram in Cuttack. Exploring the unknown was a passion with him. He had started reading astrology, palmistry and other related subjects.

He used to visit our house frequently. One day, he suggested that we contact the spirit of a dead man at mid-night with the help of a planchette. We were thrilled at the proposal.

On the planchette board were written letters from A to Z. We would sit silently at night, our fingers placed on the carom striker placed on the planchette. One of us would serve as a 'medium' and keep his finger lightly on the carom striker. We would quietly call to our minds the name of the deceased person. After a little while, the striker would begin to move. When the spirit of the dead person entered the 'medium', the striker would touch the letter on the board, which would give us the name of the deceased. Sometimes, the planchette would be disturbed by another spirit, but it would go away when we ordered it to leave. We would put questions to our chosen spirit, who briefly answered them by directing the striker to different letters on the board.

My younger brother, Bibhuti, who was then a college student, served as an excellent 'medium'. Whenever he acted as the 'medium', the striker touched the letters K, A, L, U. Kalu was Bibhuti's classmate. He was the son of the famous Congress leader, Nabakrushna Choudhuri. A rumour had been put about that he had committed suicide the year before. Since he was Bibhuti's friend, he appeared as soon as Bibhuti came to sit as a 'medium'.

One day, when we sat around the planchette, the striker kept pointing at the letters Z, E, N, O, X. We thought the letters did not add up to a proper name, and so we picked up the striker and repeatedly beckoned Kalu. After our planchette session was over, it was late at night, I climbed up the outer staircase and went into the room on the roof to collect a few bedsheets. When I came down, something gave me a start. However, I thought nothing of it and went to sleep soon afterwards.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

My head was reeling when I woke up in the morning. It seemed as if I had remained in a state of trance. My eyes were red and I was utterly confused. Nothing made sense to me.

I found myself surrounded by people. Golak babu was among them. He asked me, "How do you feel now?" I was told that, the night before, I had done something terribly unusual: like Lady Macbeth in the sleepwalking scene, I had got up and torn up my copy of Shakespeare, and threw pages onto the floor. I had also torn up some clothes belonging to my wife. I kept shouting, "I am Zenox, I am Zenox." Scared, my wife woke others up. They kept a watch on me until I became quiet and went back to sleep. All this happened without my father getting to know anything about the incident.

But I remembered absolutely nothing about it when I got up. Only a feeling of nervousness weighed on me, and I did not at all feel like stirring out. The books and papers lying scattered all over the floor did not make sense to me. From what my mother, Golak babu and others said to each other in a hushed tone, I gathered that I had been possessed by a spirit. I heard Golak babu saying, "This happens when a spirit enters someone. But there is no need to worry. Everything will be all right if we call a *gunia*, who'll exorcise the ghost."

The whole thing had been kept a closely guarded secret from father. When dusk fell, the butcher, Das Mian, arrived. I was made to sit on a wooden seat under the open sky. Das Mian sat in front of me and set about exorcising the ghost. I had to hold in my cupped hands a quantity of mustard seeds, on which had been placed a few new nails. Das Mian mumbled incomprehensible words, blowing at me and trying to drive the spirit away. From time to time he shouted, "Go away. Get gone. Never come back. I warn you. You go away. Go." At last, the rite of exorcism came to an end. I was made to follow Das Mian out of the forecourt of our house. There I scattered the mustard seeds, and drove the nails into the gateposts. Das Mian looked at my mother and said, triumphantly. 'Nothing to worry about now, mother. It was a wicked ghost, but I have driven him away and made Babu's (my name) body safe from him.'

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

As a matter of fact, I felt much better after this. Soon everything seemed all right. Father came to learn of the incident at night. He said, "From now on, no planchette sessions would be held here." His order was carried out, and the planchette was thrown away.

And yet the memory of the incident kept exercising me later in life. I wondered if this was one way in which my unconscious self revealed itself, or if it expressed suppressed sexual urges? Or, did it have other sources? I oscillated between one explanation and another. At times I thought that getting possessed by a spirit was actually symptomatic of a form of mental disorder. At other times, I thought ghosts and spirits were not figments of fancy: the unfulfilled soul of man wandered after his death, and when it found a suitable opportunity, it entered another man's body. A wicked ghost caused all manner of troubles, and could be driven off only with the help of appropriate rites and *mantras*. I had come across these two conflicting explanations in books; but I could never decide which was correct and which was wrong. However, on that day, we had accepted that Zenox, who had entered my body, was an unfulfilled soul. This conclusion we had arrived at by mixing our fancy with some incidents, which had taken place in the recent past.

In 1942, during the Second World War, Japan had sunk a cargo ship off the Kujang coast. Many foreign sailors on board the ship lost their lives. Many wounded sailors were rescued and then taken to Cuttack hospital for treatment. This incident had happened very recently and I had been an eyewitness to it. We recalled this, and assumed that the unfulfilled souls of the dead foreign sailors must be wondering around the Kujang coast. One of these, the soul of a Norwegian sailor called Zenox, must have possessed me.

One day, a message came from Annapurna Theatre asking me to come over to Cuttack. I went. On 5th June 1949, my play *Bidrohi Jagabandhu* was staged at Annapurna Theatre in a grand style. The stage glittered with decorations, new sets and costumes. Bauribandhu babu had gone to great expenses to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

get the uniforms put on by British military men in the early part of the 19th century made. Samuel Sahu cast as Major Fletcher; Dukhiram Swain and Niranjan Satpathy cast as Colonel Harcourt and Captain Thomas respectively, created quite a sensation among the audience. Master Mania playing the role of Jayakrushna, who reminded the spectators of the tyranny imposed by the British on the Oriya people, moved everyone in the auditorium deeply. The performance of Nababar Sena, who played Buxi Jagabandhu, animated the play with the spirit of rebellion. Bhanumati cast as Kasturi gave an inspiring performance. Brundaban Behera who played the role of Charan Patnaik, and Ramachandra Nanda who played that of Dewan Krushna Chandra, made the audience laugh until their sides ached. The performance of other actors also did full justice to the characters they played. The rounds of ecstatic applause which greeted the first performance of *Bidrohi Jagabandhu* left me in no doubt that I had succeeded in my attempt to inspire the audience with patriotic feelings by reminding them of their glorious heroic past. The show on the first night came to an end. Elated by the effusive compliments I received from everyone, I made my way back to Pathachhaya.

Bidrohi Jagabandhu had a successful run on the stage. I spent a few days in Cuttack. Once in every two or three days, I went to Annapurna Theatre to find out how many tickets were sold. I asked whoever I met at the theatre, "How was the sale of tickets yesterday?" I invariably received the answer, "Houseful." Whenever I ran into Bauribandhu, I found him beaming with smiles. The assistant manager of the theatre, Raju babu affectionately made me to sit beside him and enquired me of his brother, Iswar babu, who lived in Kujang. The joy of Samuel Sahu (Babi) knew no bounds. His direction of the play and his acting the role of Fletcher had earned him unstinted admiration from all sections of the audience.

However, suddenly one day, disaster struck. An Oriya daily, *The Prajatantra* carried a review of *Bidrohi Jagabandhu* written by a journalist. The review launched a scathing attack on the play and the quality of performance of the artists who

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

acted in it. The review began with the claim that the play did not have a coherent plot. Instead of discussing the incidents contained in the play, the reviewer dwelt on the incidents which, from his point of view, the play should have dealt with. This is what happens when one goes to see a play, through the lens of a preconceived idea. Not only did the reviewer denigrate the play, he said nasty things about the quality of the actors' performance. Of the performance of the actors who were cast as Fletcher, Thomas and Harcourt, the reviewer observed, "These three sahibs strike one, not as actors on the stage, but circus players."

We had been prescribed at school an essay entitled 'The Fig Tree'. The writer said that one should not take what one reads in newspaper for the truth. But, in reality, newspaper reports, even when they are not true, nevertheless influence the opinions of readers. In 1949, newspapers in Orissa exercised a very powerful influence on their readers, who took as gospel truth whatever they read in *The Samaj*, which had been founded by Gopabandhu Das, and *The Prajatantra*, which had been established by Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab, then the Prime Minister of Orissa. As expected, after the review was published, fewer people went to see *Bidrohi Jagabandhu*. A time came when only half the auditorium could be filled up.

Bauribandhu babu was desperate. For him, the future of his business depended on the success of the play. He said to me, "What should be done? Write in the newspaper which carried the review asserting that what it said was wrong." I knew that the piece, which had appeared in *The Prajatantra*, was not based on facts. Many friends told me that it was animated by malice and envy. But I responded to all these by saying, "I won't write defending my own play. Whether it is good or bad, time will judge."

Such a response used to upset and annoy Bauribandhu babu. The sale of fewer tickets worried him, too.

I had said at the time of submitting the manuscript of *Bidrohi Jagabandhu* to Annapurna Theatre that the play was based on facts stated in Mahtab's *A History of Orissa*. Now

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Bauribandhu babu went to meet Mahtab, who was a historian, scholar, writer and a discriminating theatre-lover, to find out if I had told the truth. He requested Mahtab babu to give his views about it. Mahtab babu came to see the play. After the show ended, the manager and the artists respectfully saw him off. Mahtab babu got into his car, saying not even a word about the play. May be, he was silently evaluating the play. The next day *The Prajatantra* published the following news item.

Sri Mahtab Sees Bidrohi Jagabandhu.

Cuttack, 11.7.1949. Yesterday, in the evening Sri Harekrushna Mahtab, Prime Minister of Orissa, went to watch *Bidrohi Jagabandhu*, which is being staged at the Annapurna Theatre. The play has been based on facts provided by Sri Mahtab's *History of Orissa*. Sri Mahtab was deeply impressed by the quality of the actors' performance. He expressed the view that drama in Orissa had made a lot of progress over the recent years.

A few days later, another piece appeared in *The Prajatantra* under the headline, **Bidrohi Jagabandhu**. It said:

A few days ago, *The Prajatantra* carried a review of the historical play *Bidrohi Jagabandhu*, which is being staged at the Annapurna Theatre. The reviewer made a few comments on the characters figuring in the play. He also complained that the characterisation in the play left much to be desired and violated the standards of good taste. However, we feel that characterisation in the play is flawless, on the whole. On the contrary, the costumes of the paiks and the introduction of varied incidents actually bear testimony to the author's skill in character portrayal.

These two pieces, which came out in *the Prajatantra*, and a long piece written by the noted journalist, Debendranath Patnaik, which appeared in the daily *Asha*, the fortunes of the play revived. The audience regained their faith in the play's

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

worth, and they returned to the theatre. The fame of the play spread by word of mouth. In a few days' time, the play ran to packed houses once again. Bauribandhu was now all smiles.

After the inaugural night, *Bidrohi Jagabandhu* achieved a popularity, which continues to remain undiminished. It found its way to almost all the towns and large villages in Orissa, and was produced thousands of times. Everyone involved with the world of theatre came to be directly or indirectly associated with its production. And yet, this was also a play, which lost half its audience when it received a hostile newspaper review. It had seemed at the time a cruel joke played by fate at the expense of the play and its author. After the fortunes of the play revived at the Annapurna Theatre, I went back to Kujang.

Ever since I came back from Delhi in the early part of 1949, I had to pass through a period of terrible uncertainty, which lasted until 1956, when I started practicing law. During this time, I could not keep myself from writing plays, staging them, getting associated with film production, and doing some reading. At the same time, I tried out ways of making a little money and meeting my minimum needs, since I had no source of regular income.

Father was the only earning member of our family. We had some land in Kujang and it yielded rice, which was more than enough for our needs. But my father's salary was meagre. However, he somehow managed to support his family. He had now taken upon himself the burden of my family as well. Conscience did not let me depend on him for my personal expenses. So I did not now let any opportunity of earning some money pass by.

During this time, I fell ill once more. I experienced pain in the chest. However, the treatment presented no problems this time: as soon as Dr J. Choudhury got to hear of this, he sent word; "You come to Puri and stay with me." But it was not possible for me to spend long periods in Puri. Anyway, I made arrangements for going there from time to time.

I did not find a job that would appeal to me. So I decided

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

to start a small business in Kujang itself. It was beyond me to arrange the capital needed to start a business in a place like Cuttack. Money was very scarce at the time.

I got some money from my father-in-law and set myself up as a petty contractor. My partner in this venture was Madhusudan Patnaik from Balarampur in Kujang, with whom I remained very close until his death. Our business, however, did not flourish. We did not get much profit from it, either. I had received only a couple of contracts. One of these involved the repair and extension of a building called 'Sagar Kutir,' which lay on the deserted sea beach far away from human habitation.

The location of this building was quite picturesque. It had been built on a sand dune in the virgin beach, and it stood only a few yards from the water's edge. The house was flanked on the one side, by the sea, and, on the other, by a little river. Beyond the river stretched fields as far as the eyes could reach. A chowkidar guarded the empty house. Once in a while, the Maharaja of Bardhaman or the Governor of Orissa came here to spend a day or two.

We went there with the help of small boats, accompanied by masons and labourers and taking with us provisions and vegetables. We set to work. It was Madhusudan's job to arrange bricks, stone, cement, etc, and to oversee the work of masons and labourers. I went occasionally from Kujang, and gave him company. Although our work as contractors did not prove profitable, our stay there was a memorable one. I used to spend the day watching the huge blue breakers crashing on the store. At night, I watched how the illusion of fire was created by the contact of phosphorus with the churning saline waves. My play, *Agami* took shape in this very peaceful setting.

Herds of buffaloes grazed the fields lying on the other side of the narrow river. On occasions, we got milk in a big clay tumbler from the herdsmen. Adopting a very interesting and unusual method, we made *Khiri* with this milk. We would put some rice into the milk-filled tumbler, cover its mouth with

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

a soft banana leaf and make the tumbler air-tight by plastering the leaf with mud from the riverbed. In the morning we would dig a hole a foot or two deep in the sand heap and bury the tumbler in it. We would dig the tumbler out in the afternoon, before the sunlight grew softer. The fierce midday heat, would turn the milk and rice into *khiri*. This *khiri*, to which no sugar was added, had an altogether different taste, a unique one. I called this *khiri* 'Suryakhiri'.

On some days, I used to go with the labourers and swim out into the sea, breasting a couple of waves. But I could not indulge myself in this way for long. One day, Madhu babu, while sitting on the verandah, saw me swimming in the sea. He motioned to me frantically, urging me to come back ashore, and ran towards us, shouting. When we hurried back to the beach, scared, he warned us, "Never go into the sea. In this part of the sea, you may get hurt by the sharp, pointed stumps of *Bani* trees, or may be sucked in by powerful deep undercurrents." After this I never dared swim into the sea near Sandhakuda.

Sometimes, on that beach, millions of small white crabs crawled out of their holes, pushing out the sand, and scattered all over the flat wet sand, from which tide had receded, like stars on the dark night sky. If they scented a man, they would scurry speedily away in all directions and disappear into their tiny holes.

These were *Pabana* crabs, and catching them was extremely difficult. They were also not easy to digest. But, when we ran out of the vegetables we had brought from Kujang, or when we did not get any fish, the labourers set out carrying a bunch of twigs to catch these. Since it was nearly impossible to grab them when they ran, the labourers would sweep the sand with the twig-brooms. When they did so, a couple of Pabana crabs would come out and get caught. These we roasted and mashed. Sometimes, we even cooked ourselves a crab curry.

I loved travelling to Kujang in one of the country boats at night. Country boats did not carry lamps inside them, lest the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

boatman should get dazzled by its light. But we used to take a hurricane lamp with its wick turned down. Whenever the boat sailed into the middle of a shoal of Jagari fish, we would turn the wick up, and bang the sides of the boat. The noise made the two to three inches long Jagari fish leap into the air, and then, dazed by the light of the hurricane lamp, would crash into the boat. There were times when ten to twelve seers of Jagari fish fell into the boat.

The Kujang I knew disappeared after the Paradip port came to be built there. Jagari fish no longer jumped into boats as they sailed down the little river. 'Sagar Kutir', the guest house of the Maharaja of Bardhaman, is no longer there; it has been swallowed by the sea.

Our business failed. I then set up a rice mill, borrowing one thousand and five hundred rupees from the Kujang Businessmen's Cooperative Society. My mill lay on a riverbank, at a distance of one mile from Kujang. Every day, I spent the morning and the afternoon in the mill. Mine was the first machine in the area for hulling rice. From ten to fifteen villages nearby, men and women carried loads of unhusked rice to be hulled in my mill. Village women, in the days when the mill first began operating, often used to ask me, "Babu, won't the rice smell of kerosene?" I got the machine running and showed them that the unhusked rice was hulled ten to twelve feet away from the diesel engine, and the chaff was separated from the unhusked rice. Their fears put to rest after this demonstration, they would get their rice hulled.

Soon my business picked up. Big farmers from far-off villages sent large quantities unhusked rice in boats down the river to my mill. If we received a very large quantity of unhusked rice, we had to keep the machine running till midnight. The operator of the machine was a man called Hasan Mian. He did everything at the mill, from measuring out the rice, working the machine, to collecting hulling charges. I merely spent time sitting there. Often I would spend long hours during the day staring vacantly into the river, perched on a plank on the broken-down Samagol bridge. At night I would

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

often keep gazing at the star-scattered sky. On occasions, I tried to locate the Pole Star by looking at the Great Bear. At times, during these empty hours, I made a mental map of the play I was busy writing at the time, and quickly dreamt of making a film, painting my life with the colours of a butterfly. Again I would be rudely awakened from my dreams. I wondered, would I end up running this rice mill for the rest of my life? I would feel teribly restless. If I felt like that during daytime, I would leave the mill and go home. If it happened to me at night, I would tell Hasan, "Stop the machine. Let's go home." We would lock the mill and walk back home. Carrying a hurricane lamp and the coins and soiled notes collected during the day in a cloth bag, Hasan would walk ahead of me. I followed him, carrying a long bamboo staff. My dog, Tipu, sometimes fell behind, sometimes he bounded ahead of us.

After getting into the rice mill business, I came to get involved with Kujang Co-operative Bank Traders' Society. At that time, the noted Oriya writer, Anant Prasad Panda was the Deputy Registrar, Co-operatives. Once, while on a tour of Kujang, he suggested, "You are now staying in Kujang. You should become the Vice-President of Kujang Co-operative Bank. According to rules now in force, the Registrar will be the ex-officio President of all Co-operative Banks. A member of the Society will be elected Vice-President, who would remain in charge of the day-to-day functioning of the Bank." I could not say no to him. The general body of the Bank elected me Vice-President.

I dutifully discharged my responsibilities as Vice-President for a few months. I went to a number of villages by foot to inspect the Bank's Primary Societies there. On these visits, the peon of the Bank, Gouri, accompanied me. He was an old bachelor, and we called him One Eyed Uncle, and joked with him. In his village, Basantpur, a play was staged every year during Dussera. I talked about it with him. Around this time, a Bengali gentleman, Chatterjee babu, came to see me. The Bengali he spoke was full of 'dialect' words. Initially, I had

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

difficulties following what he said. He was from East Bengal (Now Bangladesh) and spoke Bengali with a heavy East Bengal accent. He came from Khulna or Barisal in East Bengal and pronounced *dali* as *dael* and *kuthay* in Bengali as *kusae*. He was one of the refugees, who had come to West Bengal during the partition in 1947. He was an employee of a huge British jute company called 'Sinclarmuri'. It was his job to procure jute from Orissa, especially from Kendrapara, Marshaghai and Jajpur, and supply it to the jute mills in West Bengal. In Orissa, the Company had a jute procurement centre at Danpur in Kendrapara. Chatterjee babu proposed that I act as the chief agent of the Company for Kujang and Marshagahi and buy jute. I would not have to invest any money in the venture. On the other hand, I would receive a commission of four paise for every maund of jute procured. I agreed to his proposal. The arrangement worked for a few months and I received some money by way of commission every month although I did not do a shred of work. Whenever Chatterjee babu came to Kujang, he stayed with us. He related to me his painful experiences in East Bengal after the partition. His eyes would fill with tears when he described how he, with his family, left their beloved city Dhaka, and crossed Padma river in the dead of night to the other side, and became a homeless refugee. I would listen to him with rapt attention and collected from him a lot of information about the region he came from.

One day he said, "Let's go to Danpur. There you will see how the jute purchased by our Company and other companies is packed and transported to Calcutta." I went with him to Danpur by way of Cuttack. What I saw there convinced me that I should not let my name be associated with a cut-throat business like jute-procuring.

Two days later, I returned to Kujang. I wrote to the head of the Company in Calcutta saying that I did not want to be a part of its business.

After this, I started supplying fish to Calcutta. My rice mill was no longer doing well. I was not able to take proper care of it since I could not keep myself away from the world of

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

film and theatre. Other rice mills were started in villages nearby and so income from my rice mill got reduced. Again, my mill got into a bad way because I neglected it.

In the mean time, our family and I myself found ourselves in straitened circumstances. I was now the father of two daughters. When my second daughter, Sujata, was born in 1952, I was in Cuttack, preparing myself for the first year law examination. A letter arrived from Kujang saying, "You have been blessed with a daughter. Send rose-water and gripe water." My circumstances were such that I was not in a position to buy a bottle of gripe water immediately. A feeling of helplessness tormented me. Just at that time Madhu babu arrived. He persuaded me to start a fish business. The fish market in Kujang held out exciting possibilities at the time. I dreamt of getting rich quick.

But there were several difficulties to get out of the way. The road to Kujang had not been metalled yet. There was no ice factory there either. We had to get maunds of ice conveyed all the way to Kujang from the Bhima Ice Factory in Cuttack. In spite of these difficulties, a few businessmen supplied fish to Calcutta through the Patnaik Company based in Cuttack. After receiving Madhu babu's proposal, I arranged some money and plunged myself into the fish business. In a single consignment, we used to supply fifty to hundred maunds of fish to Guni Company and Mosart Company in Howrah.

Information on how much the consignment fetched in the Calcutta market reached us on a daily basis. Prices of fish fluctuated wildly in the Calcutta market. On days when a large consignment of *hilsa* caught in the Sundarbans or in river Padma arrived, the price of our consignment went down, sometimes by so much as sixty percent. Our business survived anyhow in the midst of all these ups and downs. But that year the *hilsa* season suddenly came to an end in March. As a result, we lost the money, which we had paid the fishermen in advance. We incurred a heavy loss, and our business had to be wound up.

I had written *Agami* in the first part of this phase of my

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

life, which was always full of struggle. I wrote it after the excitement of staging *Bidrohi Jagabandhu* wore off. While writing it, a few thoughts crossed my mind. Two of these deserve mention: we should not remain cut off from the main stream of world theatre. So we must not churn out formulaic plays, but write plays which would give pleasure to people and at the same time make them think. We must enjoy the theatre but think of the play. I thought that it was not enough for a play to succeed on the stage; it should also be successful as a work of art. I was also convinced that the time had come when Oriya drama, both in terms of its form and its content, should be a part of world theatre. This remained a settled conviction with me for the rest of my life. Long forty-two years after I wrote *Agami*, in 1991, the Sahitya Akademi organised a 'Meet the Author' programme in my honour in Calcutta. Following established convention, I read out a speech on my own writing-life before the writers who had been invited there. I said, "Notwithstanding my success in commercial theatre I did not return to it after *Bidrohi Jagabandhu*. My disillusionment with the commercial stage was because of the conviction that drama is not merely meant to provide entertainment, sugared with hackneyed stories and peppered with slapstick humour." (later, published in *Indian Literature*-No. 148, March-April, 1992, pp. 76-77).

This new conviction not only led to my disillusionment with the commercial stage, it also helped me arrive at a new definition of what constituted good theatre. From *Agami* onwards, I let that definition shape my career as a dramatist. I realised that all plays written for the commercial stage might not be good plays. But there would be no problem if good plays could provide entertainment to the audience and thus succeed on commercially as well. And the history of theatre is replete with examples of this.

True, commercial theatre in Orissa did give rise to a few good plays. But these were exceptions rather than the rule.

When I set about writing *Agami* I was clear about what I would exclude from it. Around this time, cracks were begin-

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

ning to appear in the edifice of our young democracy. I was apprehensive that people with vested interests, and political power-brokers might work to undermine it further. So I made my play work at two levels: on one level, it probed the political system; on the other, it explored the human psyche.

I was aware that *Agami*, since it had not been written according to a box-office formula, could ever be produced on the commercial stage. So from now on, I was prepared to go it all alone.

May be, at the time, Orissa was the only state, where the soul of drama lay trapped like a genie inside the commercial stage trying desperately to break free. The Oriya audience had accepted that what passed for theatre in our state represented the highest standards of art, because no alternative was available to them.

The difference between commercial stage in Orissa and those operating in other states of India was an enormous one. This difference was patently obvious. For instance, Sisir Bhaduri, who had taught at Vidyasagar College for eight years after doing M.A. in English literature, came forward to lead the Bengali stage through a phase of renewal. Similarly, Prithviraj Kapoor's entering the world of professional theatre was a key event in the history of the development of Marathi theatre. It would therefore simply not do to ignore the vital link between the level of the artists' education and the quality of theatre. This link has been emphasized in a letter written by Konstantin Stanislavsky, (1863-1938), one of the greatest actors and stage directors of the world, a master of stagecraft, a reputed theorist of drama and the founder of the famous Moscow Art Theatre. I reproduce the letter below:

TO ALEXANDER BORODULIN

St. Petersburg
March 11, 1901

Dear Sir,

I did not write to you for so long, because I was very busy—rehearsals from 12 to 5 and make-up at 6.30, and

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

then the performance until midnight. That is how I spend every day (don't think stage laurels are easy to get by).

I liked your first letter for its youthful sincerity, and, despite my big mail, I decided to reply, because I, too, have experienced and felt everything that you feel now. I know that I can give you good and sensible advice. Frankly, I did not like your second letter. There was something of a provincial's resentment in it. I mean such sentences as, "if I am not wanted, I won't impose", "I'll try and manage on my own somehow", etc. I would rather that I had not read those words. They indicated that you still a very young man, have a somewhat touchy sensibility. If that is so, it is very dangerous for a would-be actor. I want to forget those words, which hinder me from speaking to you in comradely fashion.

Do you know why I gave up my personal affairs and devoted myself to the theatre? Because the theatre is the most powerful rostrum, still stronger in influence than the printed word and press. It has fallen prey to human riff-raff, and they have made it a seat of depravity. My task, so far as my capacity permits, is to purge the family of actors from ignoramuses, semi-literates and exploiters. My task, so far as my capacity permits, is to show the modern generation that the actor is a preacher of beauty and truth. For this reason, the actor should stand above the crowd, either in talent, in education, or some other virtue. Above all, the actor should be refined, and should appreciate and understand the geniuses of literature. This is why, to my mind, there are no actors. Out of a thousand nonentities, drunkards and semi-literates—the so-called actors—999 should be purged, and one worthy of the calling picked out. My company consists of university people and technicians who have graduated secondary and higher educational establishments. Therein lies the force of our theatre.

Love of the stage has sprung up in you. Start by

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

making sacrifices to it, because serving art means making selfless sacrifices. Learn... When you are literate and developed man, come to me if my work will be to your liking then. Together with me and all my comrades, prepare you have talent... But talent alone is not enough, especially in the twentieth-century theatre. Ibsen squared in philosophical and social significance will monopolise the repertoire of the new theatre and only cultured people will be able to play such authors.

Provincial shouters and play-actors have reached the end of their road, and soon, God willing, a time will come when illiterate people will not be allowed by the law to serve on the stage. That is something the actors' congress is seeing to at present. To check my words, read Ibsen's plays, *The Master Builder* and *Hedda Gabler*, and decide for yourself how much more you have to learn to appreciate this universal genius. Those are just the sprouts. The fruit is still to come. To sum up, start learning, and I will then readily accept you as a helper. If you stay illiterate, I will consider you an enemy of the stage and will aim all my darts at you.

Your well-wisher,
K. Stanislavsky

Forgive me my poor handwriting and the slips of the pen, for I have no time to re-read the letter. I am writing it between acts.

(*K. Stanislavsky*: 1863-1963. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963. Pp 236-37)

Enough attention had not been paid by commercial theatre in Orissa to the fact that dramatic art could never grow without artists who were educated. The link between good art and learning came to be ignored by the Oriya stage for a very long time. This was one of the reasons why the theatre companies in Orissa collapsed after experiencing success only for a few years. Most of the actors and actresses

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

had not received much education. Some among them were even illiterate.

Circumstances led to some artists, who had no idea of what was happening in the world of dramatic art elsewhere, exercising an absolute control over the management of the stage in Orissa. They did not have the ability or the strength to make the Oriya stage move forward. For several years, the stage failed to attract new talents. It even blocked the entry of educated artists and directors into the realm of theatre. Opportunities for staging plays written by new dramatists were not created. Few new Oriya plays appeared on the scene. One could count on one's fingers the plays put on stage by the permanent theatre companies. In the absence of access to the stage, no one felt motivated to write different kinds of plays, which could appeal to the varied and changing taste of the audience. The commercial stage turned Oriya theatre into a stagnant pool. The consequences were terrible. Theatre in Orissa grew sick, and collapsed, crushed by its own dead weight.

Elsewhere in the country, commercial theatre had achieved great success. But it had not kept drama as a hostage. Dramatic art had burst through the boundaries set by the commercial stage into the larger world outside. To make possible the all-round development of drama, highly educated amateur artists had set up 'group theatres' there.

Even before all this had happened, I had stepped into an untrodden path when I wrote *Agami*. I was apprehensive that I might have to proceed along this path all by myself. But fate was kind to me. I received support from others when I put it on the stage.

By the time I wrote *Agami*, the group called Janasanskruti Sangha, which had been formed at the time of performing *August Na*, had ceased to exist. It had quickly withered away, like short-lived nightqueen flowers spreading their fragrance through the night. Its chief architects, who found the run-of-the-mill, hackneyed plays enacted on the commercial stage not to their taste at all, were now looking for a way out of the morass. I had no difficulty in locating them, for they all

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

happened to be old friends. Nitai Palit, Sarada, and I myself soon got together. Gobinda Tej came and joined us. We set to work to usher in a new theatre, and to this end, brought into being United Artists, possibly the first institution of its kind in Orissa dedicated to 'group theatre.'

We rented a house in Bania Sahi for this purpose. I was staying in Kujang at the time. I was urged to finish writing *Agami*. We were aware of the importance of finding the right kind of artists for the production of this play. Fotunately for us, this task proved easy.

Before I wrote *Agami*, I once went to see a play, which was being performed in Ravenshaw College. A stage had been erected on the tennis court, and the play was to have two shows on two consecutive nights. I stood among students who had formed a semicircle behind chairs and benches, which had been set out in front of the stage. Among the actors, there was one tall and well built young man, who clearly stood out. I was convinced that he was possessed of all the qualities, which distinguished a good stage actor. What had appealed to me most was his deep and rounded voice. His effortless movements conveyed an impression of great dignity and composure. I took Nitai babu with me on the second night of the production. When we had to find an actor, who would play the role of the psychiatrist, Saroj in *Agami* I rejected the names of several well-known artists and said, "We must cast that young man as Saroj. What do you think, Nitai babu? I believe he will be ideal for the role." Nitai babu agreed with me.

This young man was Brajanath Mishra, son of Kashinath Mishra, a famous doctor of the time. Later, Braja went to Britain and took a doctorate in law. He rose to become a Justice in the Orissa and Allahabad High Courts and retired as Chief Justice of Sikkim. Gobind Tej persuaded him to join us. We had no difficulty in finding actors for the other two important roles in *Agami:* Sarat and Suryánarayan. It was decided that Gobind Tej and Nitai Palit would play these roles. In those days, in the commercial stage, characters were created to fit the actors. But I did no such thing: I always created characters

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

and looked for artists who could do justice to them. Two women, Gloria Rout and her younger sister, Nora Rout, came forward to do the female roles in the play. After her marriage, Gloria Rout came to be known as Mamata Mohanty. She greatly enriched Oriya films through her acting. I gave the first part of the play to my friends in Cuttack, so that they could prepare the rehearsal copy and went off to Kujang. A few days later, I received several reminders from Nitai babu urging me to send in the remainder of the play. I would reply, "I am still in the middle of writing it. I'll send it as soon as I can."

But the delay proved too much for Nitai babu. One day, he and Sarada unexpectedly arrived in Kujang. I felt nervous and upset when I saw them. A few days before they came, I had been blessed with my first child, a daughter, Sabita. My friends could well imagine what anxiety I must have experienced before the baby arrived safely in a place like Kujang, which had few medical facilities at the time. So they did not take me to task for my delay in finishing the play.

My parents were ecstatic for they had now become grandparents. They discussed with my friends how they were going to celebrate the *ekoisia* of the new-born. My friends were treated to all kinds of confections prepared by my mother. Before they returned to Cuttack, I gave the first part of the last act of the play to Nitai babu and said, "Make a copy of this. I'll finish writing the remaining part and take it with me to Cuttack eight to ten days later."

Medical facilities were not widely available in Orissa at the time. A backward place like Kujang was even more neglected than other parts. Innumerable women had no option but to give birth to their babies attended by illiterate village midwives. After the baby was born, its umbilical cord was snipped not with the help of a sterilized pair of scissors, but by using a seashell.

A room in our thatched house served as the lying-in room. Straw was spread on its earthen floor and a quilt was rolled out on it. The mother was made to sit here, holding the newborn on her lap. For seven days, no one would touch her. In

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

one corner of the room would burn a fire, in which the baby was warmed. The room would be filled with smoke. Often the mother's health deteriorated for she went down with fever and cough.

Paying no heed to others' objections, I put a bed in the lying-in room and slept there at night as long as the period of ritual impurity lasted. There were no problems during the day, for my mother devotedly looked after my wife and the baby. She gave herself no rest at all during day time. But it was not possible for her to take care of the invalid and the baby at night. So I came forward to do all I could.

After Nitai babu went back to Cuttack, I busied myself with tending my wife, staying awake in the lying-in room enveloped by the silent night. I comforted my wife when she writhed in pain. I gave her medicine at the appointed hours. When the baby cried, I tried to soothe her to sleep, and kept the fire going by throwing small pieces of wood into it. It was in this smoke-filled room that I wrote the last part of *Agami* in the feeble light of a hurricane camp, the glass shade of which was black with soot. The main characters in the play, Saroj, Sarasi, Sarat and Kalyani flashed before my eyes like shadows. I concluded my play with the words of the psychiatrist, Saroj, to his young, unmarried cousin, Kalyani, who chooses to dedicate her life to serving the patients in his clinic. He says, "You see, Kalyani. We are human and most tragically human. Our lives have been thoroughly messed up. And yet we must live on, for tomorrow."

When I set down these words, day was breaking outside. Cockerels cried from the Muslim colony close by. The cool morning breeze carried in the 'azaan' from a Mosque in the distance.

I heaved a sigh of relief when I gave the finishing touches to the play, and looked down at my wife and the baby lying fast asleep on the floor. The joy that fills the heart of an artist when he creates a work of art thrilled me, and I gently shook my wife awake, saying, 'Listen... listen.' She opened her eyes and looked up at me. "I have finished writing the play. The

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

work is over." "It is over?" She asked and took the child into her arms. A contented smile lit up her face.

I was unaware that Sumitra had found her way into my play. May be, her dreams for her future role in the difficult drama of life came to be reflected in the character of Kalyani in *Agami*. Not only in the play, in plays like *Aranya Fasal* (The Wild Harvest) and *Banahansi* (The Wild Swan), Sumitra often rose from the depths of memory like bits of foam into the flux of events and disappeared again into it. While engaged in the act of writing, it was difficult to determine where feelings about personal relationships ended and artistic emotions took over. I had read somewhere, "It is impossible to see where private emotions end and artistic emotions begin."

Once the full script was at hand, work for the production of the play began in full swing. Someone hurried to the press to get the leaflets printed. Someone, after finishing rehearsals, went late at night to put up banners in the main squares of Cuttack, and to stick posters in its lanes and bylanes. Theatre had made us one, as it were, and we seemed possessed.

We could not put up a series of shows in Cuttack. For one thing, the hall of Annapurna Theatre was available for only a day or two at a time. For another, we needed around a hundred rupees for doing one show. The rent of the hall was thirty rupees, and seventy rupees were required to meet expenses on rickshaw fare, snacks and tea for the artists, and on posters and banners. Of course, we came by some money from the sale of tickets. But things became particularly difficult for us because we needed money before we staged the play.

At the time Lingaraj Nanda was manager of Annapurna Theatre. Unless he was paid thirty rupees, which was the hall rent, he would open neither the ticket selling counter nor the green room. He would never relent even if someone promised "We'll pay after the show, from the proceeds of the sale of tickets." We handed thirty rupees to Lingaraj Nanda, who would be sitting in a chair on the verandah or under a neem tree. Nanda was quite a character. My play *Agami* (The Future) was staged under such circumstances, happy as well as

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

unhappy, in the first half of 1950. The response was what we had expected it would be. The 'progressives' said, "It is a fine, neatly executed play." The 'purists' expressed their strong disapproval of the play, commenting, "What kind of play is this? No songs, no dance, no humour, no decorative elements, and only six or seven actors act in it. "*Agami* was performed in Cuttack a few times. When the first edition of the play was published by Janasakti Pustakalay—Niamat Lal Gupta was its proprietor—I requested Gopi bhai (Gopinath Mohanty, later a Jnanpith award winner), who had watched the play when it had been put on stage, to contribute a foreward. He re-read the manuscript and wrote, "With this play, Oriya drama takes a giant leap forward, moving from the middle ages into the modern age."

United Artists became rather dormant after the enactment of *Agami*. A few of our friends got transferred to places outside Cuttack. After the success of *Agami* on the stage, the thought of making *Agami* into a film crossed my mind. By this time, a public limited company 'Rupa Bhatari' had produced a film, *Sri Jagannath*. Surendra Kumar Das, an experienced businessman, had already come to occupy a special place in the world of art. I read out the script of *Agami* to him. He praised it highly. He advised me that I should never forget the entertainment angle while writing a screenplay. But I could never make *Agami* into a proper film script. The matter ended there.

Suren babu was not the only one who had listened to the script of *Agami*. I read it out also to the famous playwright, Pranabandhu Kar, Samuel Sahu (Babi), the polyglot actor Niranjan Satapathy, and other theatre lovers. All these friends, who formed a cross section of the world of drama, were unanimous that this play was different from other plays of the time. This opinion meant a lot to a raw young dramatist like me.

The praise brought me joy, no doubt, but it also scared me. I kept worrying about what subject I would choose to centre my next play on. At that time, I had to travel all the time: I moved from Kujang to Puri to Cuttack and back. But

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the thought of the next play kept exercising my mind. One day, a public meeting was being held in the Burdhaman compound in Cuttack. I went there. The meeting was being addressed by a young political leader, Ashok Mehta. At the time he was ideologically close to leaders such as Jai Prakahsh Narayan, Mohan Dharia, Madhu Limaye, Achyuta Patwadhan, and was an advocate of socialism. He was a learned man, an eminent economist. He was possessed of the gift for explaining to lay men complex political and economic issues in very simple language. I listened to him with rapt attention for long two hours. I felt fascinated by his analysis of the contemporary political situation from an economic perspective. Suddenly, while the meeting was still in progress, a thought flashed through my mind. Eureka. I found a way out. The seed of a new play sprouted in some deep recess of my mind. I came back home after the meeting ended. Then I set off for Kujang. There I set to work on writing the new play, *Abarodh*.

While writing *Abarodh* (The Siege), I veered away from the psychological emphasis of *Agami* (The Future) towards a political outlook on life. The lofty ideals of democracy were now being perverted by political power-brokers. In my play, peasants and workers joined hands and chose the path of struggle to liberate the oppressed from their stranglehold.

Like two parallel lines meeting at the infinity, Gandhism and Marxism merged in this play in an ideal world of hope and faith. The central character of *Abarodh*, Chief Minister Sri Das, who feels suffocated in a world corrupted by capitalism, plunges himself into a mass movement when his Gandhian brother Phalguni is shot dead by the police, and when he sees Sudhanshu, a Marxist covered with wounds made by the bayonet. His voice resonates powerfully in the closing scene of the play: "Everywhere our paths are blocked by greedy exploiters. But have no fear, Sudhanshu. Their resistance to the will of the masses is but a child's play. The masses have awakened. Who can now stop them?"

Towards the end of 1951, when *Abarodh* was completed,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

United Artist was in its death throes. A parallel organisation, National Music Association, was now functioning in a rented house in Bania Sahi.

It is in this institution that Sunanda Patnaik, who later earned fame as a singer of Hindustani classical music, formally took her early lessons. This institution, to which goes the credit for popularising classical music in Orissa, was at this time in its formative stage. The responsibility of teaching classical music rested on Pandit Kundala Adinarayan. The association attracted a lot of students and teachers. They included Ahad, the violinist, Ramananda Kanungo, son of Nityananda Kanungo, and Upendra Kumar Das. What Upendra Kumar Das learnt here equipped him to write *Bharatiya Sangeet*, one of the few books written in Oriya on classical music.

In the evenings, the presence of musicians and music lovers made the association a very lively place. Since United Artists could no longer organise events on a regular basis, Nitai babu and Gobind Tej used to spend time at the Association in the evenings. Gradually they felt drawn towards this institution. Gobind Tej was the chief source of the organisational strength of the United Artists. When he withdrew, no one felt like revitalising the United Artists. At the National Music Association, a department of Odissi dance was opened in addition to the one offering course in classical music. Debaprasad Das had joined the new department as a teacher. The sphere of the Association kept expanding rapidly, and that of the United Artists was shrinking fast. By the time I finished writing *Abarodh*, the Association had drawn into its fold Nitai babu, Gobind Tej and Brajanath Mishra. Under these circumstances, although I had written *Abarodh* for the United Artists, it could not be staged by it. By 1952, United Artists existed only in its letterhead.

However, an opportunity for producing *Abarodh* occurred the next year. The Drama Association of Madhusudan Law College showed interest in staging the play. A student of this college, Dhirendranath Biswal, played a pivotal role in

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

putting the play on stage. Although the United Artists had ceased to exist, my partnership with Nitai babu had remained unaffected. Nitai babu directed *Abarodh*. Two women acted in the play; Gloria Rout (later Mamata Mohanty) and Radharani Bose (later Radharani Sarkar).

Murari Prasad Mishra from Sambalpur had played the role of the Chief Minister in *Abarodh*. He was passionately fond of music, dance and drama. His elder brother, Siba Prasad Mishra, was my classmate. Murari babu, while practising law, got drawn into politics. When Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo assumed the office of Chief Minister of Orissa, Murari babu became a Minister in his cabinet. After becoming a minister, he would often jokingly say in his public speeches, even in television interviews, "I performed the role of the Chief Minister in Manoranjan babu's play *Abarodh* when I was a student of law. Because of this, later in life I could become a minister in Orissa." Years later, Murari babu would warmly remember his acting the role of Chief Minister. He would claim that it was a significant event in his career as an actor. Another actor in the play, Basant Kumar Panigrahi, came to occupy a special place in the cultural life of the state.

A very important part in producing *Abarodh* had been played by Dhirendranath Biswal. Later he became a household name in Orissa. He moved away from the stage but his contribution to Oriya cinema has made him immortal.

The first performance of *Abarodh* at Madhusudan Law College had created quite a sensation among the audience. It was the first time political analysis had found its way directly on to the stage. For the first time in the history of independent India, ministers, no matter if they were actors, sat on the stage taking part in a cabinet meeting, facing the audience. The play showed how the greed for power could turn democracy into a farce.

Two days after the play was staged, advocate Madhusudan Mohanty congratulated me. He was one of the leading intellectuals of the town. He sent me a prize, through K.S. Murthy, Principal of the Law College. Giving prizes to plays

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was then not an accepted convention. So the prize seemed like a seal of approval on a very different kind of play.

At that time an illustrated magazine called *Chitralekha* used to appear from Cuttack, which published features on theatre, cinema, art and culture. Pratap Mohanty from Kendrapara edited it. I knew him slightly at the time. He went on to become Chairman, Kendrapara Municipality, and later, in collaboration with the eminent leprosy specialist Akshay Mohanty organised relief in the earth-quake-hit Koyna in Maharastra.

A function was held under the auspices of *Chitralekha* at Hotel Paradise, which stood near Ranihat bridge to celebrate the success of *Abarodh*. Pratap babu invited to this many writers and journalists in Cuttack. Over these last fifty years, I have been felicitated on many occasions. These have gradually become routine events and lost their excitement for me. But long ago, when I was walking down untrodden paths, having strayed from accepted dramatic convention, this function had overwhelmed me. What Lakshmidhar Nayak, and the great dramatist, Kalicharan Patnaik had said of me on that occasion gave me an unforgettable experience of thrill. Lakhmidhar babu said that I was a genius. Kali babu said, "I had once told you that you had fire in you. Now one can see the flames." I regarded these words as the blessing of respected elders, so I did not let myself get carried away that day. From the day I entered the world of theatre, I had decided to be guided by the following motto: one should not feel inflated by praise like the frog in Aesop's fable, nor should one feel crushed by adverse criticism.

By 1953, professional theatre in Orissa was passing through a period of transition. Orissa Theatres was no more. There were only two institutions on the theatre scene: Annapurna 'A' group and Annapurna "B" group. Artists left one, joined the other and returned to the fold of the first one. In the midst of this flux, in 1950 yet another institution came into being. Rupasri Theatre staged plays with support from Surendra Kumar Das, Managing Director, Rupa Bharati

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Limited. In 1951, there were troubles in this touring theatre. Samuel Sahu (Babi) went back to Annapurna 'B' group with artists who had come with him to Rupasri theatre. Now it fell to Lakshmidhar Nayak, who was Managing Director, Bharati Natya Mandir, to order the affairs of Rupasri Theatre. The jute godown in the huge Burdhman compound was rented, and Rupasri Theatre staged its plays there till 1952. I was preparing for my first year law examination, staying at 'Pathachhaya', our residence in the same compound. The last act in the drama of Rupasri Theatre's survival was played out at our house. The company staged new plays by Ananda Sankar Das like *Samadhi*, and Dharmananda Mohanty's *Chouthi Rati*. It also put on stage tried and tested plays such as *Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja*, *Kabisurya*, *Gariba*, *Lal Chabuk* and *Gopal Krushna*. When *Samadhi* was performed, I made the acquaintance with the playwright, Ananda Sankar Das, and made friends with him. Quarrel over the style of management led to the disintegration of the company. Its plays did not do well at the box office. Dance teachers like Kelucharan Mohapatra, Pankaj Charan Das and Deba Prasad Das who had joined it, left the theatre. Amid great hardships, artists such as Niranjan Satapathy, Bholanath Das, Prafulla Sastri, Natabar Sena, Purna Chand, Madhuri and Krushnamani stayed with the theatre till the very end.

Many discussions were held in 'Pathachhaya', then a thatched house, between Lakshmidhar babu and the theatre artists to find a way out of the crisis facing Rupasri Theatre. But these led nowhere. Everything ended in the bitter mutual recrimination. Both sides ended up being losers, like the adversaries in Galsworthy's play, *The Strife*. Lakshmidhar babu lost his printing machines, which lay for a long time on our outer verandah. The artists for their part lost their livelihoods.

After my law examination was over, I felt quite relaxed. Our rice huller in Kujang was doing pretty well. So there was no problem about finding pocket money.

I grew restless. What should I do next? Write a play?

I had not been able to write much for a few years, caught

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

as I was in the clash between what I wanted to do and what I had to do. But the heart rebelled against the harsh and uncongenial circumstances. I thought, if I found it difficult to get any writing done, I should try out something else. United Artists had ceased to exist, but the spell it had cast over me lasted.

The places I most frequented during my stay in Cuttack, were the verandah of Gopal Ghosh's medicine shop in Choudhury Bazar, and Nata Sahu's restaurant in Banka Bazar. I used to meet a lot of friends there. Our evening get togethers turned into informal seminars on art and culture. To these get-togethers, came Nitai babu, Ray Gour Ghosh, Gopal Ghosh, Ramamohan Mohapatra, Natabar Mohanty and Balaram Choudhury.

Ramamohan was passionately fond of film and theatre. His friend Nata babu worked as a chemist in the Municipality hospital. He too was deeply interested in art, and, although he took no active part in the discussion, we cherished his presence in our midst.

Sometimes the playwright, Kartik Ghosh, the singer, Banikantha Nimaicharan, police officer and noted actor, Bimal Ghosh, who was Gopal Ghosh's uncle, and the stage-director, Khagen Mitra joined us. On occasions, Narasingh, who later became my colleague at the AIR, Sarada Prasana Nayak and Gobind Tej also came.

The idea of making a film occurred to us in the course of these rambling discussions. My association with these friends drew me into the production of two films, *Amari Gaan Jhia* (A girl from our village, 1953) and *Kedar Gouri* (1954).

What primarily motivated us to go for filmmaking was a feeling of pride in our culture. We were keen to make the film reflect the rich cultural heritage of Orissa. It was not that the thought of making money by producing a film had not crossed our mind, but that was not our chief motive. Whenever we thought about the state of Oriya cinema at the time, we felt oppressed by acute feelings of inferiority and impotence.

The first silent film in India, *Raja Harishchandra* was made

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

in 1913 by Dadasaheb Phalke. The first talkie, *Alam Ara* was produced in 1931. The triumphal march of Hindi cinema continued up to the achievement of independence.

By 1947, in Orissa we had been able to make only one film, *Sita Bibaha* (1934). Its producer was the great Mohan Sunder Dev Goswami. Then nothing happened for a very long time. By 1953, Hindi cinema, and to some extent, Bengali films, had become extremely popular in urban areas in Orissa. Educated young men belonging to the upper and middle classes in the state had become avid filmgoers. Walls in the lanes and by-lanes of the towns came to be covered with the gaily coloured posters of Hindi films produced by companies such as Bombay Talkies, New Theatres Limited, Wadia Movietone, AVM production, R.K. Production, Gemini International, etc. In the evenings, young men excitedly discussed Hindi and Bengali film stars like Sohrab Modi, Prithviraj Kapoor, Santaram, Pahari Sanyal, Pramathesh Barua, Chhabi Biswas, Ahindra Choudhury.

However, Orissa lagged far behind in the field of cinema. Fifteen years after *Sita Bibaha*, another film, *Lalita* came to be made. The Great Eastern Movietone of Dhenkanal produced this film in 1949. In this, Lokanath Mishra, who later became Governor, Assam, played Vidyapati, and the role of Lalita was performed by Uma Goenka. Radharani Debi, who was then living in Calcutta, also acted in the film *Sita Bibaha*. Her acting talents brought new life to the Oriya stage. On her, the brochure, which was published to mark the occasion of her receiving the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi award (1978-79) said the following:

> Srimati Radharani Debi was the first woman to have acted in Oriya films and plays. She played a role in the film *Sita Bibaha*, which was produced by Mohan Sundar Dev Goswami. Later, she joined Annapurna 'A' group, and gave memorable performances, especially in the role of a rustic woman. She was honoured with the title 'Manchashri' by Janata Rangamanch. After retiring from the stage, Srimati Radharani Debi is now living in Puri.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

However, this great woman's life in Puri was a wretched one. In the last part of her life, she set up a *paan* shop to be able to make both ends meet. When I was Secretary, Sangeet Natak Akademi, she often related her woes to me, with tears in her eyes.

Sri Jagannath, produced by Rupa Bharati, a public limited company, was the third film to be made in Orissa. The chief architect of the company was its Managing Director, Surendra Kumar Das. Actors and actresses who performed in this film included Gopal Ghosh, Khagen Mitra, Gloria, Samuel Sahu (Babi). Chapala, who came to be known as Chandana and Parbati Ghosh later, acted in this film as a child artist. In 1951, Ratikant Padhi from Iram produced the fourth Oriya film, *Rolles 28*. Ratikant himself and a Bengali actress named Kamala played the lead roles in it. The same year, the fifth Oriya film, *Saptasajya*, came to be produced by Great Eastern Movietone, which was based in Dhenkanal, Anima Debi and Byomakesh Tripathy acted in this.

In its formative stage, the film industry in Orissa faced countless obstacles. It rested on three pillars of support: producers, who made the film; distributors; and the exhibitors or the owners of cinema halls. At that time, there were only a few cinema halls in Orissa. But there were no Oriya film distributors either in Orissa or in Calcutta. Usually, when a producer started making a film, the distributors took its distribution rights and in return for this advanced money to the producer. But these facilities did not exist for makers of Oriya films.

These impediments apart, the producer of Oriya films was handicapped in other ways, too. There was no studio in Orissa at the time. To make a film, one had to take all the artists to Calcutta, put them up in a rented house, and stay there until the shooting was completed. The technology was also not as advanced as it is today. Outdoor shooting with the help of Mitchell cameras and sound vans involved a lot of difficulties. So, most of the film had to be shot in sets constructed inside studios. Since a number of films were being

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

shot at the same time in a studio, Oriya film-makers had to keep waiting in Calcutta until floor space in the studio became available.

The producers' worries did not end here. Since there were no Oriyas working as cameramen, sound recordists, film editors, set designers or film editors, they had to depend on technicians and directors in Calcutta. An even greater problem was finding female artists. The producers had to run from pillar to post in search of them. They had to go to the red light streets of Calcutta such as Hadakata lane or Premchand Boral Street, to persuade well known Oriya prostitutes or new arrivals there to act in their films. The early Oriya films were made with the help of a few brave Oriya girls, some stage actresses and some women from Calcutta.

It was at a time like this, when Oriya films were passing through a teething stage, we who met at Nata Sahu's shop, dreamt of making an Oriya film. A dream merchant came forward to help us translate that dream into reality. He was Narendra Kumar Mitra, the proprietor of Capital Cinema hall in Cuttack. He was known to all of us, but he was particularly close to Gopal Ghosh, who persuaded him to produce an Oriya film. After he expressed his willingness, the production of the sixth Oriya film *Amari Gaan Jhia* began. A Company called 'Utkal Chitra Pratisthan' was set up under the proprietorship of Naren Mitra. Naren babu got Binay Banerjee from Calcutta to direct the film. The film was to be shot at Eastern Talkies, which was owned by Suren Sarkar, in Dakshineswar.

The selection of a story and the writing of the screenplay were the responsibilities of the director. I was to assist him in directing the film and to write the dialogues. Binay babu said that I should spend a few days in Calcutta before the shooting began in order to prepare myself for the job. Gopal Ghosh was charged with the task of selecting artists and making other arrangements.

I wrote a letter to father from Cuttack and proceeded to Calcutta. Binay babu had arranged my accommodation in a mess in Esplanade. He had a small distribution office in Bentick

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Street. I was given space there to do my writing. Almost every afternoon, we used to go there to the Eastern Studio in Dakshineswar. The owner of this studio, Suren Sarkar, was an extremely polite and affable person. A true gentleman, Binay babu was a quiet person. He was adept at getting things done anyhow. In a short time, I grew very close to both of them. During the time I spent at the studio, I took a keen interest in the working of every department in it. I found out about things from Binay babu. He, too, never took any decision without first consulting me.

We set ourselves working on the script. Binay babu had selected the story. It was a simple one woven round the life of a village girl. One could feel in it the influence of some undistinguished Bengali film or novel. But it was perfectly suitable for a film to be made with a budget of only twenty five thousand rupees. May be, the budget dictated the choice of the story.

While working on the script of *Amari Gaan Jhia* I had an opportunity of getting a first-hand experience of the intensity of emotion of which only the Bengalis as a race are capable. It was 24 June 1953. The time was midday. Binay babu and I were in the studio in Dakshineswar, drinking tea sitting on a grimy bench in a shed made of bamboo matting. This canteen functioned as the cultural information centre of this studio occupying three or four acres of land. This was the haunt of actors wearing make-up, technicians, and semi-skilled workers who pushed trolleys on the floor. Directors discussed their next shots here with their assistants, and here, art directors got their drawings for 'sets' approved by directors. Conversation centred on films being made in other studios, and the booking position of artists.

That day, we were having tea made by 'dadu' in the canteen. (In Calcutta one called an elderly person 'dadu' if one did not know his name). We had fallen into talk. Among others, there were with us the famous Bengali short story writer and script writer Sailajanand, and the camera man, Ramen babu, and Binay babu.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

All of a sudden everything around us went absolutely quiet. Someone had brought a piece of news and everyone stopped working and poured out of the floor, the laboratory and the office, just as people rushed out when an earthquake occurred. Binay babu got up and went up to the people assembled outside. He came back to us a little while later, and said, 'Let's go.' I asked, 'But where?' He said, 'Shyama Prasad Mukherjee will be cremated at Keortala.' Pointing at others outside, he added, "They will also go there."

Shyama Prasad was one of the great leaders of the country. He commanded the respect of the nation. He was possessed of the power to make the government quake. The news of the cremation of Shyama Prasad had spread at the speed of lightning throughout Calcutta. It seemed as if all the roads of the city led to the cremation ghat.

Crowds now streamed into the main roads, the lanes and by-lanes of Calcutta. Everyone was heading for Keortala. It was as if grief had made the Bengalis forget all their political differences, differences of age, race and caste and they become one to pay its last respects to their deceased lion-hearted leader. We, too, made for Keortala.

If one compared Calcutta with a globe, Dakshineswar and Keortala were poles apart. People pushed their way into crowded buses; some travelled standing on the footboards. We travelled in a packed bus up to Shyam Bazaar with great difficulty. Beyond this point it was impossible to proceed further by bus. We set out on foot, like countless other people. Negotiating several lanes and by-lanes, Binay babu led me towards our destination. There were crowds everywhere. We pressed forward some how, barely keeping our feet treading on that of others. One could not help noticing the handkerchiefs people were carrying. They sometimes used them to wipe their sweat; at other times, they wiped their tears with them.

A huge crowd had assembled at Keortala by the time we got there. The air rang with the slogan "Victory to Shyama Prasad." The funeral pyre had already been lit. It was simply

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

not possible to get any nearer it. I paid my respects, standing at a distance and said, addressing the departed soul, "O you who had the courage of a lion! It matters little to me what political creed you espoused. I know you loved the country as you loved your own mother. Your heart bled for India and you raised your intrepid voice against its enemies. The nation reveres you. Please accept the respects of an insignificant person like me."

I opened my eyes and looked at Binay babu. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. His eyes had grown red from crying. He was not alone; everyone around was shedding tears. I said, "Let's go !" He raised his hands saluting the deceased leader and said, "Yes, let's go."

On the way back, I kept thinking of the remarkable way in which Calcutta rose above considerations of caste, religion and politics to pay its last respects to one of its great sons in one voice. This expressed the great pride that animated the inmost recesses of the Bengali heart.

When the script of *Amari Gaan Jhia* was ready, I went down with high fever, which laid me up for several days in the mess in Esplanade. Binay babu, the cameraman Ramen Pal and the art director, Mani babu came to see me. I had no money with me. So Binay babu gave me some money. Residents of the mess, whom I did not know, took turns to sit by my side. When I got a little better, I returned to Cuttack. By this time, preparations for shooting the film in Calcutta had been made.

When arrangements in Cuttack were seen to, I went to Calcutta. Two days later, other artists from Cuttack joined me. To put us all up, a house in the Central Avenue (Now Chittaranjan Avenue) had been rented. We stayed there until the end of the shooting. From there every day we went to the studio by way of Shyam Bazaar, Baranagar and Dakshineswar bus stand. For our convenience, Naren babu left his Austin car having a canvas hood, which had cost him seven or eight hundred rupees, at our disposal. Late at night, eight or nine of us would pile into the car, which was meant to seat only four.

The car moved sluggishly, like a toy train, from

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Dakshineswar all the way to the Masjidbadi Street off Central Avenue. On occasion, the car had to be 'carried' by us. When it rained (the shooting of the film began in July), the stretch of the road from Dakshineswar to Baratnagar would be flooded at places. We would get down, lift the car by hand and carry it across to the other side. It was great fun. All our fatigue disappeared when we indulged in our boyish instincts and escaped the routine of work- a-day life in this way.

The artists returned early from the studio; but I stayed back and returned with Binay babu and the technicians late at night. We had taken the ground-floor flat of a building in the Masjidbadi Street. In the flat on the first floor lived an elderly lady and her beautiful daughter. One of the two bathrooms on the first floor had been set apart for us. When I went to use this at ten at night, I would often see the elderly lady boiling water on a coal brazier. One day, I asked her, "Auntie, why are you boiling water at this late hour?"

The question embarrassed her a little; but she quickly collected herself, "My daughter comes home around eleven. That is why." I remembered that every day, at 11 P.M. a taxi would stop in front of the house and her daughter would get out of it and silently climb the stair-case. The elderly lady went and put the bucket of hot water in the bath-room. I asked her absentmindedly, "But why hot water every day?" Now she replied, mildly rebuking me, "You are such a fool, my son! How can you make a film? My daughter comes back from Sonagachhi. She'll need hot water, won't she?"

Later, Binay babu explained to me what her words meant. At that time Sonagachhi was a place where prostitutes of a higher class used to ply their trade. They spent their evenings in flats there. Their rich clients came to spend time with them secretly, without the knowledge of their families. Auntie's beautiful daughter belonged to this class of prostitutes. With the money she had earned through the sale of her sexual favours she had built this house in Masjidbadi Street. Auntie and her daughter lived in it adopting an upper middle class life style. Below the surface of a smart modern way of life

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

survived the old system of concubinage under a new name in Sonagachhi and a few other places in Calcutta.

After I got to know the facts of the life led by auntie and her daughter, another side of their profession presented itself to me.

For shooting a wedding scene in our film we needed ten to twelve female 'extras' of different age-groups. They were hired like daily labourers. They were paid according to their looks and the number of words they were required to utter in the film. The condition of these 'extras' was extremely pitiable. They were not given lunch during the shooting. All they could expect was a cup of tea. At the end of the day's work, they received their meagre wages like female coolies at a construction site. And yet, when they went home after appearing briefly in a shot or two, they felt proud that they were film artists, after all.

One day, the production manager of the film, who had to arrange 'extras', said to me, "You come with me. You'll tell me they can speak a couple of Oriya dialogues. Binay babu has asked me to take you with me." Next day, I accompanied him to the red-light areas of Calcutta in search of 'extras.' We had to find them among those pitiable, poverty-stricken creatures, who heavily made themselves up and sat on outer verandahs in the evening, alone or in groups, and lured their clients, beckoning them or uttering lewd remarks.

It was a sight, which one could never put out of one's mind. Here vendors, baskets of *Banarasi paan* slung around their neck, sold their fare to the clients, who crowded the narrow lanes. Some sold garlands, of *Malli* flowers. Others moved about selling savouries like *bara, aluchap*. Boys, tea kettle and cups in hand, went about looking for customers. Now and then one came across *attar*-sellers in these lanes. They would put a piece of *attar*-soaked cotton wool on an old customer's ear in the hope of getting him to buy their ware. From time to time, in these lanes reeking with lust, a pimp would whisper something into someone's ear and hustle him into a prostitute's house.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

This revolting scene used to keep disturbing me for years after I left Calcutta. Here and there this despicable trade came to be prohibited by law. But it did not disappear altogether; only its modes of operation changed. As Aldous Huxley observed in another context, 'Forms change, essence does not.' Man's lust found new ways of gratifying itself, and assumed new forms. 'Call girls' carried on the flesh trade in posh hotels. I wondered if this evil could ever be eliminated.

All the artists who had gone from Cuttack stayed in the rented house in Masjidbadi Street. We slept on the floor, rolling out bed-sheets. A room was set apart for lady artists. Differences of age had been forgotten. We felt as if we had gone on an excursion, and had great fun. Apart from me and Gopal Ghosh, there were Gour, Chapala, Bhabesh Das and Dhaula babu, who was the brother of the announcer of All India Radio; Bijan Patra.

When we were looking for a tall, well-built and handsome person for our film we found Bhabesh Das. He answered the description of the character. His father was the former Inspector General of Police, Rama Chandra Das, who was more famous in Orissa for his love of art than for his high official position.

Before the merger of feudatory states in Orissa, Rama Chandra Das was Police Superintendent, Mayurbhanj. He was also the manager of the *chhau* troupe. He was at once a chhau dancer, actor and theatre director. His passion for theatre remained undiminished after he came to occupy a high position in the Government of Orissa and even after he retired from service. Under his direction, my play *Buxi Jagabandhu* was staged a number of times by the Police department. This had brought me closer to him and I was entrusted with the task of persuading his son, Bhabesh, to act in our film.

Dhaula babu arrived in Calcutta a little later than the others. He travelled to Calcutta by Puri-Howrah express in the morning. The moment he reached the house in Masjidbadi Street, all previous arrangements made for putting people up there were turned upside down. For a few hours we found

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

ourselves plunged into a great bustle and utter confusion. When he stepped out of the taxi, we found that he had brought with him a huge four-feet long trunk, which looked like the one used by opera parties for storing their costumes. Besides the large trunk, he had brought with him a couple of small suitcases, and a small briefcase, too.

On arriving, he went round all the rooms in the house. He found a room downstairs which was to his taste, and kept all his trunks and suitcases there. The clothes and some personal things of others, which lay in that room, he took and deposited in another. Then he hung a clothes line from one end of the room to the other and lay on it six to seven pairs of trousers, six to seven coats having different cuts, a few shirts, a few *dhotis* and *punjabis*, and a dozen or so ties and socks, not to mention handkerchiefs, underwears and vests. Half a dozen shoes and slippers made according to different designs were taken out of a small tin trunk. These had been polished to a sparkle. These were neatly set out against the wall.

His behaviour left everyone puzzled. I asked him, before he had set about arranging the room, "Your shooting will be over in a day. Why did you bring so much luggage?"

He coolly said, "What then?" and set to work. Then he asked, "Breakfast? What time do you have breakfast?"

I said, "We have breakfast early in the morning. At eight thirty, the car comes to pick up the artists. The shooting begins at ten."

"Okay!" He was blasé. "For breakfast I always have four slices of buttered toast, an omelette of two eggs. I can make do with two poached or boiled eggs. And half a mug of coffee." When he uttered the last sentence, he turned to look at me, smiling.

I left his room, pretending not to have heard him.

A little while later, I found Dhaula babu going from room to room. I thought he was doing so because he wanted to find out how the others were getting by. But I was wrong: he kept asking everyone, "Do you have a 'housewife'?" The question left everyone confused. Why should someone ask

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

them if they had housewives?

However, the confusion got cleared up after a time. While getting ready to go to the studio, Dhaula babu discovered that his coat had lost a button. He followed strict rules regarding what he would wear, on different days and at different hours of the day. He did not happen to have a spare button of the right colour and size. So he went around trying to find out if someone had a button he could use, and looked for a 'housewife.'

The English word 'housewife' (it was pronounced 'huzif') did not mean only one's wife, or the lady of the house. It possessed another meaning as well: a box to keep odds and ends. Dukes, Lords and such men of rank in Britain never forgot to carry such a little box wherever they went. If their dress showed a tear or lost a button, to keep appearances, they would promptly repair the tear and replace the button with the help of this box, which contained needles of different sizes, buttons, a thimble, a small pair of scissors, etc.

Everyone had felt bewildered because Dhaula babu called this box 'housewife' instead of 'huzif.' After this incident, he attracted everyone's attention. Some whispered, "We have traveled to Calcutta to make a film on a shoe-string budget, but this chap is going to make us bankrupt."

But it turned out that, far from making us go under, he in fact saved us. It was he, whom some of us scoffed at, denigrated, who came to our rescue when we were in trouble. Strange things sometimes happen in life.

Artists had to show their gate-passes to the durwan when they entered Eastern Talkies studio. Everyone had to keep his pass with him. But this rule was not insisted on when someone the durwan knew got in, or when an important person drove inside in his motor car. When the shooting of our film began, the semi-technicians, the trolley men, carpenters, light-operators and labourers seemed to look down on us a little.

Suren Sarkar had given strict instructions to workers in his studio that they should never fail in showing proper respect toward those who came to shoot a film there. Even so, a

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

few made it clear they did not think much of us, for we had been shooting a film involving no famous artist or big producer. For them, we were after all a mofussil party from Orissa, who were beneath their contempt.

But all this changed the moment Dhaula babu set foot in the studio. The day before his shooting date, he came there on his own, a little later than us, in a taxi. The taxi pulled up in front of the closed gate of Eastern Talkies Studio. The durwan demanded to see the pass. Dhaula babu felt deeply annoyed. How dare the durwan ask him, of all people, to produce a pass? He thundered from the back seat, "You are the gatekeeper, aren't you?" This was enough to make the Nepali durwan realise that he should not have asked such an important person to show his pass. Acting on a reflex, he gave the sahib seated in the car a salute and threw the gate open.

Dhaula babu made a tour of the studio and inspected the sets. He stopped and asked someone in Hindi, "How is everything going?" Sometimes he gave someone a pat on the back, saying, "Good, this is okay." He asked someone else, "When was this Mitchell camera purchased?" He enquired of another, "What is the name of the sound engineer of the studio? Is he technically qualified?"

After the tour of inspection was over, he drove to Esplanade to have lunch there. On his way back, he stopped at Masjidbadi Street and changed into another outfit. On reaching the studio, he sent for the production manager.

"You are in charge of production?" he asked him in Bengali.

"Yes, sir."

"Please pay for the taxi. To and from Esplanade. Yes, it was detained for an hour."

The production manager stood gaping at him. Dhaula babu turned round after taking a step or two, and said, "Where is Ramen babu, our cameraman?" "He is in the laboratory, testing the negatives," came the reply.

"That's all right. Remind him that he is to accompany me to the Shyam Bazaar coffee house at half past five."

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

In those days, Shyam Bazar coffeehouse was the favourite haunt of intellectuals, journalists, writers and jobless young men, who spent hours there talking. Publication, film production and business deals without number got struck there. For young men and women in love, the coffeehouse was an ideal place for passing the time of the day.

The sudden appearance of Dhaula babu at the studio, his carrying himself like a millionaire, made the studio employees look upon us with a new respect. Some now said of us, "This party from Orissa is not to be dismissed lightly. They have people who matter." I then realised that to behave timidly like a country buffoon outside would not do however talented one in reality might happen to be; that smartness and confidence did matter a lot.

In the middle of all these interesting experiences, the shooting of *Amari Gaon Jhia* began on a wet afternoon in July 1953. For many days afterwards, the excitement of that day had laid me under its spell, like the first touch of a bride.

On occasions, when I found the time, I used to visit Bahubazar Street in the evening. The street was crowded with Oriyas. It had two important bookshops, one owned by Akuli Mishra and the other by Manmohan Press. These two shops were frequented by a lot of Oriya labourers, but they did not come there to buy the *Ramayan* or the *Mahabharat*. Nor did educated or semi-educated Oriyas, who frequented these places, went to buy novels written by authors like Chandramani Das, Lakshmidhar Nayak, or Kahnu Mohanty. All classes of Oriyas went to the shop in large numbers to buy the famous *gudakhu* produced by Akbar Khan in Cuttack.

Akuli Mishra gave leadership to many Oriya organisations in Calcutta for long years. He owned an Oriya printing press. His bookshop and the Manmohan Press was a great meeting place for Oriyas. The great Oriya dramatist, Aswini Kumar Ghosh, a simple, unassuming man dressed in *dhoti* and *punjabi*, came here often and sat on the rush mat spread on the floor. He gave himself no airs at all. It was here that I had got many opportunities of meeting, and talking to him.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Mahesh Chandra Ray from Tendakoda in Cuttack district had a passion for drama. He was a colleague of Aswini Ghosh at P.M. Academy and a very close friend during his career as a dramatist. Aswini Ghosh and I talked about him and the famous opera director, Kunja babu. Once during our conversation, I said, "I want to end my acting career by acting in your play *Irani.*"

He asked me, "Why?"

I said, "If I act on the stage as well as write, I fear that I might fall between two stools. So I have chosen to concentrate on writing plays."

He patted me on my back with great affection and encouraged me, saying, "You have taken the right decision. Go on writing."

I was reminded that day of another wrinkled, white hand stroking my head and blessing me, saying, "Go on writing." This had happened during the first phase of my relationship with Kali babu. The year was 1943. One day, when I had gone to meet him at his residence, Kali babu said, "Let me introduce you to my uncle." I went with him. The carriage took us to his uncle's house in Bhasakosh Lane. The two of us entered a room.

I found there a thin old man seated among heaps of books. I went near him and bowed down before him, joining my palms. Kali babu introduced me, saying, "This is the young man whose play *Trutiya Drushya* will be put on the stage by Orissa Theatres. The rehearsal is on. He is the nephew of our friend, Banambar babu, the police officer. Please give him your blessings." The old man stretched his hand, touched my head and said, "Write.. Go on writing." This old man was none other than the great Gopal Chandra Praharaj. He dedicated his entire life to compiling a monumental work named *Purna Chandra Bhasakosa*. He also left a priceless literary work like *Bai Mahanti Panji*.

During the shooting of *Amari Gaon Jhia* I chanced to meet at the bookshops many eminent Oriyas who lived in Calcutta. My stay in Calcutta was therefore an exciting one.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Our work in Calcutta came to an end. After the editing of the film was over, I returned to Cuttack. In course of time, the film was released in Capital Cinema in Cuttack.

Oriya cine-goers did not warm to the film. The newspapers were not enthusiastic about it, either. In short, the film was a 'flop'. The most scathing review appeared in a film magazine called *Cine Orissa*. The founder and editor of this magazine was Kali Charan Tripathy. He had started a big business in glassware in Cuttack. Later, he left for Andhra Pradesh. His younger brother, Rama babu (the owner of Glass House) retained his links with the film world. Dhirendranath Biswal was closely associated with *Cine Orissa*, and regularly wrote in it.

My friends in Cuttack were hostile to the film. At first, it seemed to me as if their unfavourable opinions on the film were off the mark. It was not as if some of my friends were not motivated by malice. But in the end, one incident convinced me that the film had failed to touch the hearts of cine-goers in Orissa.

Back in Cuttack, I once more joined the evening sessions at Nata Sahu's restaurant in Banka Bazar. One day, when we all were deep in talk over cups of tea and *singada*, my eyes chanced to fall on a table close by. At the table sat the famous poet of Orissa, Godabarish Mohapatra, sipping tea. His fiery poems challenged the Oriya race to rise from stupor:

Rise O you skeleton, shattering your chains
Bring back the glory that is gone.

The magazine *Niakhunta* (The Firebrand), which he edited, constantly prodded the Oriya race, reminding it of its duties and drawing its attention to where heaps of corruption lay. I got up and went over to this fearless, diminutive man and paid him my respects. Mohapatra had the news of everything at his fingertips. He asked me, "I hear you have made a film. What is the name of the film? *Amari Gaon Jhia* or *Amari Gaon Sali*?" (Jhia in Oriya meant a girl, *Sali* referred to one's wife's younger sister.)

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Godabarish babu's sarcastic remark vividly brought home to me the truth about how Oriya cine-goers had received our film.

The same year, another memorable event took place in the history of Oriya theatre. I myself got deeply involved with it emotionally.

Another evening at our usual meeting place. I had just come back from Calcutta after finishing the shooting of *Amari Gaon Jhia*. With us that evening there were Niranjan Satapathy and Narasingh Mohapatra. I knew Narasingh when he was a student of P.M. Academy (Later he became a colleague of mine at the All India Radio. We grew very close to each other, like two brothers.) May be, artists like Natabar Sena and Prafulla Sastri were among us, too. We were talking about how to inaugurate the newly constructed Janata Theatre during the coming Dussera Festival.

By this time, Rupashri Theatre, which put up its shows in Bardhaman Compund, had ceased to exist. The artists who worked in it were now living in wretched poverty. They were eager to get a theatre house constructed at the same site in Banka Bazar where Orissa Theatres had stood earlier. The owner of the plot, advocate Sushil Palit was requested to donate it. But much more than a piece of land was needed to set up a theatre. What was to be done now? Everyone's thoughts turned to Mahtab babu.

Mahtab babu was not unaware of the hardships the artists were going through. One day, Narasingh babu and I met him and entreated him to do something to help the artists. He said, "Come tomorrow at 9 A.M." Why he did so became clear to us later. At the appointed time the next day, four of us, I, Narasingha, Natabara Sena and someone whose name I fail to recall now, went to Mahtab babu's bungalow in Behari Bag.

We sent in a slip and went in. In the office room upstairs were sitting Mahtab babu and Biju Patnaik. We paid our respects to them and stood waiting. Mahtab babu looked at Biju babu said, "See if you could do something to help these people out." We were sure Mahtab babu had talked to Biju babu about

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the need for getting a stage built for theatre artists earlier. Biju babu told us, "Meet me at my residence."

Narasingh and other artists then went to call upon Biju babu at his residence in Tulsipur. I had not accompanied them. Their experiences with Biju babu there were very interesting. Coming back Narasingh showed me a piece of paper, on which was written with a red pencil, "Singh, contruct a stage for these people." Narasingh was ecstatic and he went on, "When we went to Biju babu's residence, we found him seated on the verandah, smoking a cigarette. We told him what we had to say. He said nothing except saying 'hun' a couple of times. Then he picked up a piece of paper, wrote this on it and handed it to us."

I asked, "But who is this Singh?"

"He is the contractor of the OTM factory at Choudwar, which Biju babu owns." This summed up Biju babu's style of doing things, which even the passage of time could not change at all. He remained the same always. A word from him, and the Janata Theatre, owned by the artists themselves, sprang into existence.

Dussera was at hand. My artist friends were keen to get the theatre inaugurated. But they did not have the money needed to buy scenes and to decorate the stage. They now tried to arrange funds from whatever sources they could tap. This problem was exercising their minds when I was talking to them about the inauguration at our meeting place at Nata Sahu's shop in Banka Bazar.

They were convinced that, since I had just returned from shooting a film in Calcutta, I must be having some money. They also knew that I owned a rice huller in Kujang. They therefore asked me to arrange some money anyhow.

I had not yet received the thousand rupees, which was my remuneration, from the film producer. So I was in no position to help my friends financially, although I very much wanted to do so. But Narasingh was persistent. I remembered that a motor bike was lying in our Cuttack residence. I said, "I have a motor bike. I don't know how to ride it. So it is lying

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

idle. You could pawn it somewhere and get some money." The understanding was the motor bike would be reclaimed with the money earned through sale of tickets during Dussera and be returned to me.

A day or two after I offered to let my motorbike be pawned, Niranjan Satapathy came and said, 'We have found a pawn broker.' There was nothing for me to say. I had to keep my word. I opened the lock on the motorbike. Niranjan pushed it down the road and passed out of view. The motor bike never came back to me. Nor did I get any of my money back. But I had no regrets. I never asked, my friends, "Where is my motor bike? Where is the money?" In fact, like the squirrel in the *Ramayan*, who dropped a few grains of sand on the stone dyke Lord Ram built across the ocean, I felt quite glad that I had done my bit, however, small, for the contruction of Janata Theatre.

While I was thus drifting through life, preliminary work on the production of the seventh Oriya film began in Cuttack. The idea of making this film had also taken shape during our aimless dreamy gossip sessions held in the evenings.

Those days Choudury Balaram Das, who hailed from the family of the zemindar of Bhingarpur in Puri, came often to our evening get-togethers. He was staying at his family house at Jaunliapatty in Cuttack at the time. Whenever he enthused over the idea of producing a film we would jokingly say, "Balaram babu, please dig deep into your pocket." He would reply, "I'll see. Let me ask my brother."

It was extremely difficult at that time to arrange financial support. Our pockets were absolutly empty, but an irresistible urge drove us on.

In the end, Balaram babu's brothers gave the green signal. One day, Balaram babu came, and said, smiling, "We will do the film."

A company called Radha Pictures was formed. It was decided that a film on the legendary characters, Kedar and Gouri, would be made. The legend held an intense emotional appeal for Oriyas. It was a story of love. Our aim was to project

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the beautifully crafted temples of Bhubaneswar to the world at large by shooting the film outdoors. This consideration guided our choice of the story. Nitai babu and I were entrusted with the task of jointly writing the story and the script, and of directing the film. I also had to write the dialogues.

On the first of January 1954, Nitai babu, Balaram babu, Gour and I arrived in Calcutta. Our job was to book a studio and make arrangemets for the accommodation of the artists. This time, too, we decided to shoot our film in Suren Sarkar's studio Eastern Talkies, at Dakshineswar. A two-storyed building was rented at Barangar to put us all up.

After making these priliminary arrangements in Calcutta, we came back to Cuttack and went about looking for artists. The writing of the script had made good progress. We, Nitai babu, Balaram babu and myself, took great pains to find artists who could do justice to their roles in the film. Finding a girl who could be cast in the role of Gouri proved very difficult. We kept searching. Both Nitai babu and I were convinced that theatre and film could never become respectable or develop properly unless educated women from good families came forward to act in them. We frankly discussed all the factors, which inhibited women from respectable families from acting in films. We formulated an unwritten code of conduct and went ahead with missionary zeal.

We needed two artists: one for the role of Gouri as a child, and another for that of an older Gouri. Sheela, daughter of my wife's uncle, Gobind babu, who was a police officer, was cast in the role of little Gouri. I persuaded Gobinda babu to let Sheela act in the film, with great difficulty. Someone told us about a college-educated girl, who lived in village Punang in Jagatsinghpur area. She belonged to a highly respected family. Her name was Bina. She was the niece of the famous nationalist poet, Birakishore Das. We were lucky. Her father let her act older Gouri. After the film was made, she married Nitai babu, and moved away from the world of film acting.

Radharani Bose's father, Gagan babu, a great lover of art, readily agreed to let his daughter act in *Kedar Gouri*. Radharani,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

who was a very young girl at the time, was made to play the role of a mother. She had to be given special make-up to make her look old. Gloria Rout agreed to be cast as another mother. Others who acted in the film were Ullas Mohanty, Ray Gour Ghosh, Nitai Palit, Hamid Nasad and Baikuntha Mohanty. Finding an artist who would play the villain 'Rahu' in *Kedar Gouri* presented a lot of problems and drew us into a great deal of discussion and arguments. At that time, the film industry was in a stage of infancy, and artists had not yet been typecast. So it was difficult to decide who could do a hero's role and who a villain's. One had to act only on one's hunch and go by the artist's looks. For the character Rahu, we were looking for someone who looked different and could entertain by saying funny things while playing this villain. I suggested Dhira Biswal's name for this role. "We have the right person at hand. He is none other than Dhira Biswal. This theatre-mad artist will soon enter into the spirit of the character. And his physical appearance will suit the role he would play extremely well." My friends liked the suggestion. Dhira was sent for. He was cast as Rahu.

For directing music for the film, two brilliant and rising musicians were chosen. One of them enchanted Orissa by singing songs in his melodious voice and breathed new life into Odissi music. The other thrilled his listeners playing on the violin. He was a pioneer in the filed of preparing notations for Odissi music. Together they brought Orissa great distinction at the national level. These two musical geniuses came together in their youth to direct music for *Kedar Gouri*. They were none other than Balakrushna Dash and Bhubaneswar Mishra. Young singers of the time lent their voices for the film. They were: Balakrushna Dash himself, Bina Devi, Radha Gobind Patnaik, and Radhakrushna Bhanj. Minati Das, under the pseudonym 'Chandrikachaya' performed an Odissi dance. Lyrics for the film were composed by Kali Charan Patnaik, Janakiballav Mohanty and Parsuram Patnaik.

The absence of outdoor shooting had made *Amari Gaon Jhia* seem somewhat grey and colourless. It had failed to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

appeal to the audience because it had no shots of the natural landscape. We therefore made sure we included a few outdoor sequences in *Kedar Gouri*. A location in the area around *Kedar Gouri* in Bhubaneswar was identified. One day a sequence was being shot under the arch of Mukteswar Temple, showing little Kedar and little Gouri playing merrily, running about on the perimeter wall, and diving into the stone-bordered pond inside the temple premises. A crowd had thronged up the place to watch the shooting.

Walking barefoot on the stones in the heat of April, a handkerchief wound around our heads, Nitai babu and I saw to the arrangements. With us were Ullas (little Kedar) and Sheela (the little Gouri), and the technicians of the outdoor unit. Among them was Tapan Sinha, a well-known cameraman, who was in charge of the Mitchell camera. In later years, Tapan Sinha achieved fame and recognition at the national level as a film director. There was another young man with us that day. I had asked him two days before to be present during the shooting to help us.

This young man, after passing out of college, had gone to Yugoslovia. He returned to Orissa after studying cinema technology and photography at an advanced level there for a few years, and joined as film production officer in the department of publicity of the Government of Orissa.

I knew this tall, gentle, unassuming young man when he was a student of Ravenshaw College. He was a man of few words. He was among the four friends of my younger brother, Bibhuti, who used to visit our house regularly and had become almost members of our family. These four young men were: Debi, Rajendra, Jati and Pati. Years later, they all established themselves in their chosen professional spheres. Debi Prasanna Patnaik achieved international recognition as a linguist. Rajendra Prasad Das made a mark as a researcher. Jatindra Mohan Mohanty raised Oriya criticism to a higher level. And Pramod Pati, the young man I am talking about here, laid the foundation of cartoon films in India and brought his country international recognition in the field. Unfortunately,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

untimely death put a sudden end to this brilliant career.

On that day, a long shot was being taken in the premises of Mukteswar temple. A 'dummy' artist was made to stand on the spot, and several angles from which the shot was to be taken were being tried. The depth of sunlight was measured again and again with the help of the instrument slung around the cameraman's neck. Nitai babu and I repeatedly peered through the viewer of the camera to see if we were getting a frame, which would be to our liking. But things did not work out to our satisfaction. We were running out of time and smarted under the scorching sun. I told Pramod, who was standing beside me, 'You take the shot.' By Pramod's side stood Tapan Sinha, one of the most talented cameramen in India. Pramod looked up at him. Tapan understood why he did so. He urged him, saying, "Don't worry. Take the shot. Go ahead." Even so, Pramod hesitated for it was a public test of his abilities.

But I could not stand the delay. I prodded him affectionately, "Go ahead Pramod." Now he slowly made his way towards the camera. Tapan took the light-measuring instrument that hung form his neck and handed it to Pramod. Pramod confidently selected another action zone, made the child artists stand there in the place of the dummies. He then measured the intensity of the light from different angles, and at last came back to the camera. He changed the location and angle of the camera and looked through the viewer. Then he turned to us and said, "Ready." We all considered the frame looking through the viewer. Tapan said, "Excellent angle." After one rehearsal, the clapstick boy stood before the artists.

"Silence... Ready... Start the camera." The camera started to roll. The clapstick boy moved out of the action zone. The child artists began acting. The sequence came to an end. We shouted, "Cut... Cut." The camera stopped rolling. The shot was okay with one take only. Then we packed up and retired to a dak bungalow nearby for lunch.

Very early in life, Pramod had proved that he would fill

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the air with fragrance of his talent when he grew older, like a tulsi plant.

After the outdoor shooting was over, indoor shooting of the film took place in the studio in Calcutta. After the shooting, everyone except me returned to Cuttack. I waited until the editing and printing was done, and came back to Cuttack, carrying the censor certificate on 2 October 1954. The very same day, the film was released at Prabhat Cinema in the evening.

In the fitness of things, it should have been a moment of joy for me. But it proved to be a terribly depressing occasion. Not that I was unaware of the fact that films were made in a cut throat world. But I had never expected that I would so quickly fall a victim to the treachery routinely practised in this world.

While I was busy in Calcutta during the last stage of the production of the film, Radha Picutres brought out a brochure containing a synopsis of the story of *Kedar Gouri* and the film's lyrics. This was distributed among the members of the audience on the day the film was released. The same brochure announced that another film would be produced under the banner of Radha Pictures. The announcement mentioned who would direct the film, who would direct the music, etc. But my name figured nowhere in the list. It took me no time to identify the person who had persuaded people associated with Radha Picutres to exclude me. Everything had been kept a closely guarded secret until the very end. This incident rang warning bells, and I realised I could never survive in the treacherous world of film-making.

Just at this time, one of my legs began to swell a little. I went to Puri. Dr J. Choudhury examined my leg and diagnosed filaria. He gave me medicines and advised me not to exert myself and to take rest. I came back to Kujang. This time, on my way home, I had brought with me something in addition to the new disease I had contracted. I had bought a set of Jagannath Das's the *Bhagabat;* and a few books on Jagannath Das.

While in Kujang I made a point of reading a portion of

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the *Bhagabat* every day. I ended up reading through the whole text three times. Later in life, when I had to pass through periods of confusion and hardship, the serene wisdom of the *Bhagabat* lighted my way.

During this peiod in my life, financial hardships bitterly tormented me. My mind drifted like bits of silk cotton driven hither and thither by the wind. My father-in-law, Gopal babu used to visit us now and then during this time. He was a man of very gentle disposition and treated me almost like a friend. One day, we had a talk. I narrated to him the story of my many failures. He asked, "What are you planning to do now?" I expressed my feeling of helplessness, saying, "I don't think I can thrive in the uncertain and treacherous world of film-making I don't know where fate will lead me after this."

He gave me a piece of advice, drawing upon his vast experience of life, "Remember. A rolling stone gathers no moss. You are no better than a rolling stone at the moment. You may do whatever takes your fancy. I have nothing to say against that. But you must have a concrete skill. You must therefore sit for your final law examination. (I had left for Delhi in the middle of the second year of my law course. Those days, the L.L.B. course took two years to complete). Take up legal practice. Everyone will take you for an unèmployed person. It matters little if you earn something or not..., at least you will enjoy a certain standing in society. You will then be free to indulge your love for theatre, cinema, or what have you." I could feel the force of his argument. A ray of light seemed to shine through the darkness. In 1955, I got myself enrolled in the second part of L.L.B. The examination was held in December the same year. I passed. Adopting unfair means for getting through an examination, or copying from books in the examination hall had not become common practice then. So I had to work very hard, preparing for the examination. I had lost touch with the textbooks; so it took a long time to be able to concentrate on my studies once more.

My self-confidence received a great boost when, three months before my examination, I weathered a very tough

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

circumstance. This experience was an unfailing source of strength all my life. The town of Cuttack was flanked by two rivers: the Mahanadi on the north, the Kathajodi on the south. It was September 1955. Kathajodi was swollen with floodwater. Word went round that a breach had occurred in the embankment of a river near village Barada, which lay on the Cuttack-Jagatsinghpur road. Sandbags were of no use against the mighty currents. People were desperately trying to save the embankment from being washed away.

At midday, news that the embankment had given way spread like wildfire. I was sick with apprehension. The thought of my family in Kujang tormented me. Someone said that the floodwaters would submerge Kujang and its neighbourhood. Someone else suggested that, since the floodwaters would spread themselves out as they approached the sea, Kujang would not come to much harm. But no one could be sure what would be the height of the water level when the flood waters got as far as Kujang. Under other circumstances I might not have bothered so much about the flood. But now the situation was very different. My wife was expecting. I thought I should be present at Kujang at a time like this. Leaving my father to cope with the problems entirely on his own would not be right. So I resolved that I must go to Kujang, come what may. I set off without delay.

From four in the afternoon, a river of humanity started flowing down the Cuttack-Kujang road. I somehow queezed myself into a bus belonging to Cuttack Motor Association, which was packed to suffocation. The conductor said, "The bus is bound for Kujang. But let's see how far it can go. We don't see any buses coming from Kujang. We don't know how far the flood waters have advanced."

Our bus reached Kandarpur. The place was full of people. The flood waters gushing out of the breach further off had already come as far as Kandarpur. Looking ahead, we saw the floodwaters, which now lapped against the embankment of Taladanda canal, had already submerged the low-lying stretches of the road. The bus stopped there. It was

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

impossible for it to proceed any further.

We got down. Some desperately headed along the embankment for their villages. One group planned to go to places such as Tarapur, Manijanga, Kujang by foot, negotiating the northern embankment of the canal. I joined this group. From Kandarpur, Kujang lay about forty kilometers away.

There was no time for hesitation. We crossed to the other side of the canal by boat and gained the bank of river Mahanadi, which formed one of the embankments of Taladanda canal. The waves of the swollen river beat furiously against the bank. The path we had taken happened to be an untrodden one, and was overgrown with thorn bushes. We followed the narrow track made by cowherd boys, who took their cows to graze the island in the river. The track often lost itself through the dense undergrowth. We had decided against taking the southern embankment because it lay rather low, and had either given way or got submerged at places. It was midnight by the time we reached Jaypur bazaar, and by this time, floodwaters had started pouring into Taladanda canal by way of a narrow gully. We were racing against the on rush of floodwaters, and we ran ahead of it as we marched towards Kujang. We were so scared, we did not have time to look back or to bother about the problem of walking down an untrodden, overgrown path. Voices crying in despair reached us from villages by the canal.

The mud walls of houses in low-lying villages came crashing down. Our eyes were beginning to get used to the darkness and we heard the cries and screams of domestic animals and human beings terrified at the onrush of the flood. Someone carried his children on his shoulder to the safety of a neighbour's high verandah. Another bore his mother on his back and waded through waist-deep water towards a Punang tree on the canal embankment. Somewhere an old man cried desperately, "My wife got left behind. Please someone bring her out."

The sky was overcast when we set off from Kandarpur. It rained a few times on the way. Two persons in our group

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

carried torches. Four of us were wearing trousers. The slippery clayey path, thorn bushes and the drizzle compounded our difficulties. We walked in a single file. If the man walking at the head of the line felt exhausted, he would stop, and the whole group stopped to regain their breath. While marching, someone would take out his betel box, prepare betel cones and pass them on to those walking before and behind him. Someone would ask, "Does anyone have a matchbox? I want to light a bidi." The matchbox would pass from hand to hand and reach the man who wanted to have a smoke. Danger had created a strong feeling of solidarity among us. Depending on the width of the track we followed, our group sometimes divided itself into a few smaller groups. They walked close to each other. Some held hands. Some laid their hands on their companions' shoulders. It seemed as if a large family was going somewhere. When the larger group got split up into smaller ones, people started sharing their sorrows and joys, and made acquaintances, with each other. They discussed how long it would take them to reach their different destinations. Everything under the sun—from the rumour that a large crocodile would swim through the waters all the way to the temple of Goddess Sarala to offer her worship, to village politics and court cases—cropped up during their conversation. My feet grew very tired after trudging for some time. I had put on a pair of trousers, shoes and socks. My shoes came to be covered with mud, and my trousers were drenched up to the knees. *Guguchia* seeds clung to the lower half of my trousers and stung my legs. So I found it difficult to keep pace with the rest of the group. I now sought the help of my unknown friends to get over this difficulty. In our group was one Sankar Das,who belonged to village Arakhia in Kujang. He was one year my senior at Kujang High School. His family, which possessed a lot of landed property, was quite well known. He used to stay in Professorpara in Cuttack. Later, he established himself as a special class contractor.

Sankar Das was the only person in the group whom I knew. He walked a little ahead of me. When he saw me stop,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

he walked back to me and asked others in our group to stop. He got someone to lend him an electric torch, and someone else lent him a nut-clipper. I pulled out my shoes and socks and flung them away. Someone sliced off the lower half of my trousers with the help of the nut-clipper. I felt very comfortable now. The group moved on. I sometimes shouted, "If someone can sing, let him please do so." Some people sang whatever song they could remember. Jokes were exchanged. When the whole group got thoroughly tired out, someone told a story. In the stillness of the night, even low noises carried very far. Sometimes someone would say, addressing me, "O you, wearing half your trousers, do tell us a story." I would reply, "Not now. I'll tell one when all of you would get so fatigued that you would stop." That stage we reached when we came to Tarapur lock. We rested from our labours for a while there. Some helped themselves to stale *baras* and *gulgulas* from a sweet shop. Our grcup lost half of its members here. A few went to their villages, which lay nearby. A few, feeling unable to walk any further, decided to stay the night at Tarapur.

I related a story during the second leg of our journey. It was not a story really; I merely reproduced something I had read on a Chinese play. The play dealt with the long march undertaken by a group of Chinese soldiers. The revolution in 1911 led by Sun Yat Sen, which had brought the monarchy in China to an end, degenerated into a civil war. Sun Yat Sen died in 1925. He was succeeded by Chiang Kai Shek. With the backing of a powerful army, Chiang formed the government led by the Kuomintang or the National Party. The new government had its capital in Chungking. The moment he came to power, Chiang expelled Communists from the party, the government and all positions of power. Now the Communists led by a 35-year-old young man called Mao Tse-Tung, set out from the sourthern part of China to Yenan, which lay in the north. There they formed their own government and the civil war began, which continued beyond 1945, even after the Second World War came to an end. At last the Communists emerged victorious and Chiang fled to Formosa. During the

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long march, which the communists had undertaken when they had been thrown out of the party and the government by Chiang, covered a distance of six thousand miles. In the course of the march, Mao and his comrades had to endure untold hardships; but they remained steadfast. Fired by a great zeal, they marched for days on end on empty stomach, in the scorching sun, and plagued by illness. Only one supreme objective guided their steps: reaching Yenan. Human history cannot furnish another example of such a heroic journey. History recognised the journey's importance by designating it the Long March.

I intended to inspire my companions during our journey through the night by narrating to them the story of the great adventures and to urge them to move forward braving adverse circumstances. For us, our own adventurous journey that night remained unforgettable. For me, personally, it represented an extremely difficult test. After I got through it successfully, I realised that if one had the will, one could achieve even the impossible.

Day was breaking when our journey came to an end. When we reached Kujang, people were still in bed. They got news of the embankment giving way at Daleighai from us. A few hours after our arrival, the first stream of floodwater, flowed into Kujang. By this time, the currents had lost their force. Even so, there was no knowing how high the water level would rise. Many put up small tents made of bed-sheets and bamboo stakes with floors of straw on the other side of the canal. They shifted their families there. Father pitched a tent like this for us across the canal. We had to spend only a day in the tent. My wife, who was pregnant at the time, felt relieved at having been moved to a safer place. Next morning, when it became clear that the water level would not rise any further and that the small rivers and gullies had drained the floodwater, people returned to their homes.

I had gone to sleep in the tent built for us soon after I arrived in Kujang. When I got up a few hours later, my feet had swollen up, like two leavened loaves of bread.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

I came back to Cuttack after spending a few days in Kujang for my law examination was close at hand. Soon afterwards, I received news that I had been blessed with a son. As soon as the result of the examination came out, I put on a black gown and started practicing law. I was cheerfully confident that no one would call me an unemployed person from now on and that becoming a lawyer had at long last conferred respectability on me. I practised law for three years, till 1958, the year in which I joined All India Radio. After I entered the legal profession, I felt as if I had entered a whole new world, which seemed strange and fantastic to me. For a few months, I worked in the chamber of Advocate Dinabandhu Sahu. The day I first went there, he did nothing except exchanging small talk with me. Among the many topics we touched upon that day, one concerned theatre and my writing life. That day I reminded him of his playing a female role in the play *Goudabijeta* during his college days. He said, smiling, "A lawyer should be a good actor, too. Or else he can never cross-examine witnesses successfully." Dinabandhu was a brilliant criminal lawyer. During the cross-examination of witnesses, he put questions to the witnesses with such tact, that they came out with answers he wanted them to give.

The evening I first went to Dinabandhu babu's chamber, his *moharir* slipped some money into my hands when I left for home. I looked at him, bewildered. He said, "When some one joins our chamber, he is given the entire amount received as consultancy fee that day." This pleasant experience on the first day of my new life made me feel very happy. My bicycle moved towards 'Pathachhaya' faster than usual.

Dinabandhu babu practiced mainly in the higher courts. He rarely took up cases in the lower courts. One day, I was sitting alone at the oval table in the district civil court bar association and thinking to myself that I should have some experience of lower courts. At this time, I felt someone's hand resting on my shoulder. I started and thought, "Had it been Bipin, he would have shouted 'Babu bhai' from a distance. Besides, Bipin would never have placed his hand on my

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

shoulder." I turned around and saw Biswanath Pasayat standing behind me, and patting me on the shoulder. In his right hand he was carrying a file and his gown. I rose to my feet out of deference for him; but he gently made me sit down, and said, "How is everything?" These few words exuded love, affection and the authority of an elder brother. It appeared as if he had sensed what was passing through my mind and was spontaneously offering help and support. In fact, he had guessed my problems. He went on, "If you don't deal with cases in the lower courts, things will be difficult for you. Also, one should be familiar with the procedures of lower courts if one wants to be a good lawyer. All right. Come to my chamber from tomorrow."

Biswanath babu was an eminent lawyer in Cuttack. He had a reputation in higher as well lower courts. He dealt with all kinds of cases. He was a communist. In the past he was a student leader, and was associated with the Communist Party ever since its inception. He was a living symbol of sincerity and integrity. Although he was a lawyer by profession, he always sprang to the defence of the oppressed. Known for his outspokeness and ethical conduct, he never minced his words. But all this concealed a kind, pure and loving heart. His generosity left me puzzled.

Biswanath babu had a passion for literature and he used to write essays. When I joined his chamber, he read out to me the stories he had written for children. He was an authority on the stories of the *Mahabharat*. He had rewritten them and put them together in a manuscript which bore the title, *The Magic of Mahabharat Stories*. This read better than even his *Russ Bhraman* (Travels in Russia). May be, the 'radar' of his literary sensibility had helped him spot me. A few days after we met, I went to his house one morning. My legal practice made a real beginning that day. Biswanath babu opened his chamber for me. I did well as a lawyer and started making good money.

It is said, a husking paddle pounds rice even if it is in heaven. Even the legal profession could not take me away from the world of theatre. At that time, a dozen lawyers in

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Cuttack bar, young and old, had formed some kind of a group. They were so close to each other, they called their group 'a family.'

Whenever they were free, they would sit around the oval table. Their clients and moharirs came and got their papers signed by them there. Everything under the sun came up for discussion. The Bar Association peon, Dhulia, brought them tea, coffee and cigarettes and paan. The head of this 'family' was Advocate Sadasiv Mishra. The other members of this family included Biswanath Pasayat, Rajendra Chandra Mohanty, Ramachandra Ram, Bipin Behari Mohanty, Dayanidhi Singh, Purna Chandra Mishra (Later he became a High Court judge). On account of my closeness to Biswanath babu, Rajendra Mohanty and Bipin, I was taken into the 'family.' Occasionally, before a long vacation began, a senior member of the 'family' invited the other members to his own family for a meal. In summer, the members were served soaked rice with curd during a 'family get-together.' Since I had joined the legal profession ten years late, I had no problem in getting on with these and other senior lawyers. By the time I began my practice, my firm links with the theatre world had already become well-known among the lawyers. Around this time, Dhira Biswal, too, had joined the bar. When we fell talking around the oval table, we dicussed theatre, among other things. One day, I proposed, "Let's stage a play under the auspices of the Bar Association. Life here is getting lost in a welter of court cases and money." Ram Chandra Ram heartily supported me. Biswanath Pasayat was the Secretary of the Bar Association at the time. For the first time in the history of the Bar Association, it was decided to produce a play. The play to be performed was *Abarodh* (The Siege). This play created quite a sensation among the lawyers and others in the audience.

In this play Rama Chandra Ram was cast as the Chief Minister, two other roles were performed by Dhira Biswal and Abanikant Ray. Later, Abanikant Ray joined the Indian Administration Service, and retired as the Chairman, State Administrative Tribunal. In the female roles were cast Radharani

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

and Debikarani. Later, they joined AIR as announcers.

My life as a lawyer was a time of back-breaking hard work. I got up early and went to the chamber. The whole day I spent in the court. At night I went back to the chamber. To prepare for important cases, I had to go through law books until late at night and train witnesses. I increasingly realised that, to achieve success in this profession, one had to forget everything about conscience, justice, truth, and moral values.

During my brief career as a lawyer, I had to deal with a very peculiar but extremely funny law-suit involving one Haricharan Goel. He belonged to Bihani in Haryana. He was a broker in Malgodam in Cuttack. The case had been filed by a businessman in Buxibazar, Thakur babu, against his erstwhile partner, Kashiprasad Jhunjhunwala. Although Haricharan, who was Thakur babu's sister's son, had little to do with the matter, the case had been registered at his instigation. Several other cases bearing on the main case had also been filed. A great many lawyers in Cuttack got involved with either one side or the other, like Kurus and Pandavs in the Mahabharat War.

In the past, a grocery shop in Buxibazar was partitioned when the two partners who ran it, Thakurprasad and Kashiprasad, fell out with each other. The shop had originally belonged to another person, who was from Bhagalpur in Bihar. He once went to Bihar with his family. There he and all the members of his family were wiped out in an earthquake. Kashiprasad came to inherit his business and his property, claiming that he was the owner's sister's son. Now Thakur babu stayed on as his partner. A few years later, they quarrelled, and Thakur babu left and started his own business. Now arrived on the scene his sister's son, Haricharan. He said to his uncle that Kashiprasad was not at all related to the owner, that he had cornered all the property telling a lie. He should therefore be taken to a law court and punished. His uncle, Thakur babu, agreed with him. Haricharan now sprang into action. Several petitions were sent by Haricharan to the government. Many officers were approached. They received the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

same response everywhere, "Where do you come into the picture in this case?" Haricharan could not give a satisfactory answer to this question. All his attempts came to nothing. He had paid many lawyers their fees for filing a case against Kashiprasad, but nothing came of it. But he remained absolutely undeterred, and kept insisting, "Kashiprasad has taken away someone else's property. He must be made to give it up."

One day, while Biswanath babu and I were on our way to the Bar Association office, Haricharan who had a long khadar shirt on, followed us, running breathlessly and met us on the road. He said to Biswanath babu, in Oriya that was mixed with Marwari and Hindi, "I have been looking for you for a long time. Everyone told me that you are the best. You must take up my case. Please don't say no to me, *babuji*. Don't wory about your fees. Whatever you ask for we'll pay." He came with us to the Bar Assciation office and there he slipped some currency notes into Biswanath babu's hand. He also pressed a few notes on me, saying, "This your junior's consultation fee." Biswanath babu said to him, "Please meet me later at my chamber."

In the evening we went through his documents and heard him out. The case was not admissible. But Haricharan was insistent. "There must be some law under which he could be booked. Please consult a more experienced and more eminent lawyer. Money is no problem at all." He was obstinate and would not take no for an answer. After consulting a number of law-books, a way was found at last. If an heirless person dies before making a will, his property will go to the Government. In legal parlance, it was called 'escheat.' As per Indian Penal Code, it was a cognizable offence to hold such property illegally. Every citizen has the right to go to a law-court to enforce this law. Haricharan Goel filed a petition against Kashiprasad in the court to enforce the law, according to section 404, IPC.

Haricharan was our client in the original petition. Hemendranath Kanungo fought on behalf of Kashiprasad

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Jhunjhunwala. Haricharan was under the impression that the case would be stronger, if more advocates fought the case on behalf of a client. Kashiprasad also entertained a similar view. As a result, several lawyers—Biswanath Pasayat, Dinabandhu Sahu, Bipin, Nimai Patnaik and myself—fought on the case on the side of Haricharan. Besides Hemendranath, Chintamani Acharya, Basanta Sahu and Dhira Biswal were on the side of Kashiprasad. Several miscellaneous cases and contempt proceedings were also started. Haricharan would buy quite a few law books, give them to us to study and find laws to initiate contempt proceedings against Kashiprasad.

This case was like a storm in a teacup. At last, the obstinate Haricharan lost all the cases and went off to Haryana and set himself up as a broker there.

Once I had to accompany him to Bhagalpur in connection with the case. It was already dark by time we reached our destination. Haricharan had arranged a room for me in his friend's house. Sleep came over me as soon as I hit the bed. I woke up at day-break. Melodious songs sung by women greeted my ears. I was enchanted. Initially I could not make out anything. Such music and so early in the morning! I came onto the verandah. Groups of women walked down lanes and by-lanes. Women in Bhagalpuri printed saris looked like colourful butterflies flitting in the air. These women went to ponds and rivers for taking their bath early in the morning and they sang the beautiful lyrics composed by the famous Maithili poet, Vidyapati. I enjoyed the experience. The beautiful scene often flashed across my mind's eye.

As I busied myself in fighting law-suits, I felt a void growing within me, for I was moving away from the world of theatre. I had not written a play after *Abarodh*. It was not possible to write anything while practising law—I came to realise this cruel truth. I felt a deep anguish within. I wondered if I could not make life and the living same for me. Can't I bring my profession and inclination to one straight line?

The radio station in Orissa had already been ten years old in 1958. It was the nerve-centre of Oriya art and culture.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

The station functioned at Madhupur house in Buxibazar, which had been taken on rent. It functioned there till it was shifted to its own building in Cantonment road. Suren Mohanty, Nayan Kishore Mohanty, Madhab Charan Mohanty and Mahammad Rafique had joined the All India Radio as programme executives. They were my contemporaries, and I was a friend to all of them. It was a 'B' grade station. When the station was set up, D. Sengupta came to Cuttack as its head. Later, U.L. Barua came as the Asst. Station Director. These people were later promoted to the rank of Director-General. Once the famous Bengali writer, Syed Muztaba Ali came as its head. As they were not familiar with the art and culture of Orissa and were transferred to other places after about a couple of years, formulation and management of programmes rested with programme executives.

Two categories of people worked in the radio station. The administrative wing comprised the Station Director, Assistant Station Director, Programme Executive, Transmission Executive, etc. They were all government servants. Artists constituted the other category. They played instruments, sang songs. These musicians, composers, writers and other performing artists were known as staff artists. They were not government employees; they worked on a contract basis. Gradually, another class emerged out of the staff artists—'Staff Artist-Producers.' They presented programmes and were responsible for maintaining the artistic standard of excellence. They worked out the programme schedule for every three months and got it approved by the Station Director and the Director General. They also recommended the names of artists for different programmes. The programmes were produced either by themselves or by others.They also conducted rehearsals and were responsible for the success or failure of the programmes. The programme executives had administrative responsibility. They signed contracts with artists and also saw to a few other jobs. At first, there were no regular producers. Programme executives managed both administration and production.

Efforts had been initiated to employ producers, when I

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

joined AIR for the second time. It had been felt that experts in the fields of art, literature and culture should be appointed in the radio station.

Since staff artists were not regular government servants, no educational qualification or age barrier was stipulated for them. Had it been otherwise, talented artists like Balakrushna Dash and Hariprasad Chourasia would never have been able to perform for All India Radio. Balakrushna Dash became the victim of a conspiracy and had to quit the AIR. Later, however, he worked as a casual artist and played a leading role in popularising Odissi music. Eminent persons like Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Gopal Chhotray, Bhubaneswar Mishra, Beena Devi and Nadia Bihari Mohanty had joined the AIR and Mishra, Mohanty and Devi had been promoted to the rank of producers. Other artists who had joined the AIR included Parsuram Patnaik, Samuel Nayak, Narasingh Mohapatra and Sachidananda Das. The system of promoting established artists to the rank of producers and entrusting them with the responsibility of producing programmes received the approval of the government during the tenure of Keshkar as the Minister of Information and Broadcasting. He believed in the principle of recognising the primacy of artists, and his method yielded the desired result. That was the golden age for the AIR programmes based on art, literature, drama and music.

It was possible to maintain the standard in different departments, since only established persons were in charge of producing programmes. Of course, a few programme executives also made significant contributions to this process. However, the good days did not last long. Excellence in the field of art no longer remained the norm. Rules were soon changed. Educational qualifications became an important criterion, and artistic expertise was given a back seat. As a result, the standard of the programmes declined.

P.V. Krishnamurty joined as the chief of the radio station at Cuttack in 1957. He was extremely amiable and had a quick grasp of things. He was an expert in music. He easily became familiar with the people of the area he worked in and tried to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

give a new lease of life to its culture. Cuttack radio station made a lot of progress during his tenure. He composed a new composition by blending the tunes of Odissi and folk music, with the help of artists like Bhubaneswar Mishra. The composition 'Chaturanga', which he composed with the help of Bankim Pal, was his first gift to the music lovers of Orissa. He had composed quite a number of them with the help of some eminent musicians: with Bimal Acharya he composed 'Meghanad', with Hariprasad Chourasia 'Jhadajhanja',with Bhubaneswar Mishra 'Pallishri', 'Triranga' and 'Bananira Maya'. He himself composed 'Swarateertha' and 'Sephali'. All these raised the standard of radio music. Oriya music could now reach villages through radio. Krishnamurty raised rural folk music to a higher level by composing new tunes. The popular signature tune of 'Ki Heba Sua Poshile',which was played before the 'Gaan Gahali' programme, was composed at his initiative. He also inspired Suren Mohanty to compose the dance drama 'Krushna Gatha.' Broadcast of this programme led to its being staged in several villages and formed a part of our cultrural life. The decision to broadcast the cultural programme organised by Cuttack Kumarotsav Samiti was taken by him. Later Krishnamurty was promoted to the rank of Director General of All India Radio and Doordarsan. After his retirement he became the Vice-President of the central Sangeeta Natak Akademi.

Krishnamurty did not fail to spot me when I was practising law. I met him at a meeting in Cuttack, a few days after he joined the radio station there. Like someone intimately known to me, he urged me saying, "Why don't you join us?" I was not satisfied with the legal profession, and now felt again drawn towards the AIR.

Ten years after the Cuttack station was set up, it was decided to broadcast local news in Oriya. I applied for the post of sub-editor. Sibaram, the Director of the News Services Division at Delhi, came to Cuttack to select the Sub-editor. I remembered the incident with Vannot in 1948, and was afraid that it might be repeated.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

But my fears were unfounded. Vannot was an administrator, but Sibaram was a journalist who worked as a correspondent for the news agency, Reuter. He was not a regular government employee. He came to manage the News Service Division of All India Radio on a contract basis.

He came to know from my bio-data that I worked for the News Division of All India Radio in Delhi. He asked, "Why did you leave the News Service Division?" I felt unsettled and could not give a reply. He gave another look at my bio-data, and said, "Oh ! That was an ad hoc appointment." I said, "Yes". He asked other members to put questions to me, if any. He got up, lit a cigarette and came on to the verandah. No one else asked me a question. Sibaram was the Chairman of the selection committee. I had a feeling that I was going to be selected, and that I would soon be coming back to All India Radio.

By this time, I had grown extremely close to my senior advocate, Biswanath Pasayat. He loved me like his younger brother. I had to cover a long distance from Station Bazar to Raghunath Jew lane twice a day by bicycle. He realised my difficulties and told his wife to give me lunch every day. I felt shy but there was no way out. Since that day, I took lunch with him on all working days and went to the court with him. Only after I finished my business at court would I come back to my house.

Our two families had also come closer. Mrs Pashayat and my wife became good friends. Biswanath babu's children called me 'Uncle '. His son Arijit Pasayat, later became a judge in High Court. It became difficult for me to say that I would leave the legal profession. One day, when Pasayat was alone, I said, "I don't like practicing law. I shall like to join All India Radio." He never expected it from me. He only said, "You don't like law? All right then."

I joined the radio station. My leaving the legal profession did not bring an end to my relationship with Biswanath babu's family. He comforted me like my elder brother, when we had to leave our house and property at Kujang under painful

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

circumstances. He and Bipin fought the case on our behalf. I used to visit him when he fell ill. My wife and I visited him in the Cuttack hospital; we stayed there till late in the night. He passed away. I would always treasure his love and affection for me.

I joined the Regional news section in May 1958. At long last vocation and my inclination became one. I felt settled, and devoted myself to writing. The cultural atmosphere of the radio station gave me a rare opportunity to write plays.

I had worked there for a year and a half. Gopal Choudhury, who was initially a correspondent for Cuttack, later joined me. Subsequently, he was shifted to the Programme Section. Those days announcers were held in high esteem. Expert announcers like Bijan Patra and Gobind Rath worked there. Satya Sarangi came to our Regional news section as a newsreader. He was quite handsome and was endowed with an excellent voice.

Satya was shifted to the News Service Division in Delhi after a brief stay in Cuttack. He died in a road accident there. Debendranath Mishra, who had already worked in the Drama, came to the news section. Mishra's voice and his style of delivery were excellent. M.A.N. Iyengar came from Delhi to head the newly opened Regional news section in Cuttack radio station. He believed in saving money and always disapproved of avoidable expenditure: "Don't spend unnecessarily. One should save as much as one can. One may need money in difficult circumstances later."

That reminded me of an episode in Sarala Das's *Mahabharat*. Once Bhima, the younger brother of King Yudhisthira, carried a letter from his brother to Kubera, the god of wealth. When he reached Kubera's palace, he saw an ugly old man sitting on the ground, picking up scattered grains and putting them into a basket. The old man asked Bhima, "Who are you looking for, son?" Bhima replied, "I've come to meet King Kubera. I bear a letter to him from King Yudhisthira."

The old man said, "Give me the letter. I'm Kubera."

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Kubera read the letter. It said that there was a famine in Yudhisthira's kingdom and that Yudhisthira wanted to borrow grain to relieve the distress of his subjects. Kubera received Bhima with courtesy and sent bullock-carts loaded with grain. Bhima returned cheerfully. After the carts advanced a little, they were caught in a heavy downpour. The road became muddy and the carts got stuck. Bhima got worried, and he returned to Kubera to seek his advice. Kubera advised him, "Throw the grain on the road. Load more grain on to the bullock carts, which can now move on the grain lying thick on the muddy road." Thus the problem was solved. But Bhima was surprised and asked, "Your Majesty! When I came here, I saw you picking scattered grains. Now you've ordered me to throw grain on the road. Aren't you feeling sorry for this?"

Kubera said, smiling, "No. One must grow rich by not squandering one's wealth. How does it matter if one had to scatter a few hundred *pauties* of paddy on the road to save people from a famine?" Sarala Das has made Kubera utter these words of great wisdom. The people of Karnataka were like Kuber by nature in this respect.

Iyengar rolled with laughter when I related this story to him. Until he left Cuttack, he would always tell me, "You call me Kuber !" He would recall the story and burst into laughter.

He did not stay here long and went to Bangalore. One day, after he left, Swami babu suddenly appeared in the newsroom of AIR. Two journalists, both having the surname 'Swami', were quite well-known in Orissa at the time. One was N.R. Swami, who worked first for the Press Trust of India, and later for *The Statesman*. The other was N.K. Swami. He worked for the United News of India. I knew this Swami closely, and esteemed him for his journalistic skills. One day he came to the news section. That day, in the course of talking to him among many things, I came to learn that he had joined as the 'in-charge' of the regional news section. I was glad that I would now get the opportunity of working with him. But one thing left me puzzled: Why should someone, who could easily have worked as senior editor or in some such important

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

position in the news room in Delhi, choose to work as a casual artist in the news unit in Cuttack?

However, I soon came to know why he did so. The news agency for which Swami was working had been wound up. In between jobs, having nothing to do he went to Delhi. There he had met Mr. Sivram, who was the chief of the news section? Maybe, Sivram thought it would be a pity if an experienced journalist like him sat idle. Sivram therefore asked Swami to work at the AIR, Cuttack, until he found another job.

An office order to this effect was issued immediately. Maybe, except P.V. Krishnamurty, no one at AIR, Cuttack knew anything about the matter. Swami spent only a few months with us. He had a very keen news sense. He would meticulously go through the Press Trust of India news scrolls. Then he would tap out flawless news bulletins on his typewriter. I learnt a lot of things from him. He used to share with us many very interesting and amusing anecdotes. He lived in a two-storeyed house near Choudhury Bazar, which I used to visit quite often. Mrs Swami served us coffee, which had a distinctive flavour. At that time, I was getting a house built with a loan from the Housing Co-operative Society. The President of the Society, Banamali Patnaik (later he became Education Minister of Orissa) had told me to obtain this loan. I had to spend only eighteen thousand rupees for getting the ground floor of a two-storeyed house having six rooms ready for occupation. Since Swami then lived in a rented house, I urged him, "Why don't you construct a house of your own?" Swami laughed and said, "Fools build houses; wise men live in it."

Shortly afterwards; Swami found another job for himself, left the AIR, and I was placed in charge of the news section. At that time the system of reporters sending news to the AIR had not been put in place. During my tenure, a few journalists working for the newspapers were accredited by the AIR. The first two journalists to be associated with us were my friends, Gopal Mishra and Prafulla Mohanty. They sent news from Puri and Cuttack respectively.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

While working in the news section, I got an opportunity to tour Orissa. At the time, the famous journalist Radhanath Rath was Minister for Agriculture, Government of Orissa. At his initiative, a group of journalists toured Orissa to have a look at the agricultural development programmes of the state. I went with this group. The Department of Agriculture treated us as special guests. Officers and peons, and vehicles loaded with provisions accompanied us everywhere. We were shown, in particular, exhibition farms, the areas affected by shifting cultivation, and cashew plantations raised to check soil erosion. We travelled through Cuttack, Dhenkanal, Sambalpur, Balangir, Kalahandi, Koraput and reached Ganjam by way of the Aruku valley in Andhra Pradesh and the Ananta mountain pass, which had been named after the founder of the Ganga Dynasty in Orissa, Anata Barma Chodaganga. We had followed a circular route. During our trip, we went through a region rendered lush green by the waters of the Hirakud Dam. The sight presented by village Samsara in Atabira block greatly charmed us. The villagers met us half-way, greeting us by beating drums and singing. On the main village path stood their tractors, and in their barns stood tall mounds of paddy sheaves. They told us with immense pride, "One of our fellow villagers has been honoured by the President of India for gathering in a large harvest."

Many villages in the area had discovered the path to prosperity, like Samsara. But who were the gainers in the end? Who took advantage of the facilities made available to these areas? Later, I got several opportunities of revisiting this part of the state. Everything seemed the same. But the local people had lost their land. A lot of it had passed into the hands of outsiders, who had persuaded the local people to part with their land for a better price. This was a cruel joke, fate had played at the expense of Orissa. The landless local peasants remained buried in darkness as ever.

At that time, thousands of cashew trees were being planted on the hills of South Orissa. We thought these hills would be covered with cashew trees in a few years' time. The

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

whole region would spread like a green carpet under a deep blue sky. Truck loads of cashew nuts would be exported to other countries, and the treasuries of Orissa would overflow with dollars. But alas, this was not to be. During our tour, we returned by way of Aruku valley. Fields of vegetables, plants and sugarcane stretched as far as our eyes could reach. Scientific methods of farming had been adopted for maximising production. Everything—irrigation facilities, fertilizers, improved seeds, and expert advice—had been made available to the Andhra farmer. The land yielded a profusion of fruits and flowers. Seeing all this, I hoped that soon my own state would begin to look like this. But that did not come to pass. Who is to blame? Unworthy politicians, bribe-taking, government employees or, lazy farmers? Or all of them put together? This question kept oppressing me in the years following our visit.

The tour had enlarged my experience and broadened my taste. In addition to my beloved rivers and the sea in Kujang, I now came to adore the hills, which here and there rose above the green forest. Maybe, for this reason, my play *Mahodadhi* (The Ocean) was set on a sea-beach and my play *Aranya Fasal* (The Wild Harvest) was set in a lonely dak bungalow in the heart of a forest. For my one act play *Ispat* (Steel), I had chosen as its setting a mining area in Sukinda, which was ringed by hills.

At the time when I was working in the news section of the AIR, the permanent harbour at Paradip had not yet been built. The Japanese cargo ships, which came to take iron ore from Orissa dropped, anchor five or six kilometers from the shore in deep sea. Iron ore was carried over to these by means of big barges.

The first Japanese ship, which came to Paradip, was called *Yamasitamaru*. Armed with a notebook, a pencil and an L 2 B tape recorder, I set off for Paradip to report the news. On that day, the sea-shore at Paradip had a festive atmosphere. The place resounded with the sound of conch-skills and ulullations. Under an immense awning, a *puja* was performed by the then Chief Minister, Mahtab babu, to accord a ceremonial welcome

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

to *Yamasitamaru*. The Captain of the ship sat by his side. After the *puja*, small groups of VVIPs and journalists boarded barges and sailed up to the ship. I was part of one of these groups. Rafique, who worked in the programme section, was also present at the function. For the first time in my life I enjoyed the privilege of touching a ship. The experience sent a thrill through my body. I was reminded of the voyages made by young men of Kalinga to Java, Sumatra, Ceylone in the remote past.

That day, I went on a ship for the first time in my life. But it was not the last. A few years later, I spent quite some time in a submarine off the Visakhapatanam coast. On another occasion, I spent an enjoyable day in deep sea on board an engineering ship of the navy called *Amba* as the guest of its Captain. I have also been to several ships, big and small, which dropped anchor a little way off the shore. But the excitement I had experienced on touching *Yamasitamaru* that day at Paradip I have never felt on any other occasion. I had picked up a small piece of iron ore lying on its deck and brought it as a souvenir.

The ceremony of welcoming *Yamasitamaru* ended. I returned to Cuttack at night. The next day I discovered that my cassette recorder had failed to record much of the programme. The time at which the programme was to be broadcast had already been announced. I was terribly upset. Maybe, the recording machine became dysfunctional in the press of people. I told Mr Krishnamurthy about my problems. He reassured me saying, "Don't worry. We will record Mahtabjee again." This is what we did. I went to Mahtab babu and got a message from him recorded. Producing the newsreel now proved easy. We had the stock effects. My commentary, the sound of the ship's siren in the background, the bustle of the crowd, the indistinct chanting of *mantras*, the sound of conch-shells and ullulation—mixing all these together, we produced a very nice programme. Mahtab babu and many others listened to this programme. Those days, people from all classes in society listened to the radio.

I can never forget an incident, which took place when I

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was working in the news section of the AIR. I don't know if the administrative system helped the police to cover up their inefficiency before independence, but soon after India became independent, the police tried their utmost to do so. On one occasion, I became a victim of bullying by the police. The then Home Minister of India, Gobind Ballav Pant, had come to inaugurate the Red Cross Blood Bank, which had been set up in front of the hospital in Cuttack. I was in the news desk. The inauguration ceremony was to take place in the afternoon. The regional news was to be broadcast soon after the function. Speed was the most important consideration with people broadcasting news. No one wants to hear stale news. So the news reader of AIR, Debendra Nath Mishra himself had gone to the spot to send the news by phone, and to record the function, for one could not depend upon PTI and other sources if the news of the function was to be broadcast the same day.

The time of the evening news bulletin was drawing nearer. I was anxiously waiting for Debendra to call.

The telephone rang.

"Is it Deba? What's the news?" I asked. Deba said, sounding quite perturbed, "There is a lot of violence here. People are throwing stones. Protesters have surrounded the Home Minister's car and are attacking it. The police have fired tear-gas shells to clear the way for the minister. I am wiping my eyes as I talk to you." Deba had a feeling for drama. So he held out the receiver for a while and then said, "Can you hear the noise of the scuffle. That's the sound of a tear-gas shell bursting. Did you hear it?"

I said, "Don't get upset. Record everything from a safe distance. Whatever happens after this will go into tomorrow's news bulletin."

I replaced the handset and wrote out the following report: Today, in the afternoon, while the Home Minister, Gobind Ballav Pant, was going to inaugurate the Red Cross Bhavan at Cuttack, protesters blocked his way in front of the medical college, with black flags. A large crowd gathered there. Stones were thrown. After all attempts at restoring order failed, the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

police had to resort to mild lathi charge, then to firing tear gas shells to disperse the protesters.

While writing this news, I first received a call from a police inspector, who asked me if I would report the incident, which had taken place in front of the medical college. When I said yes, he said, "Don't include it in the bulletin." "How can I do that?" I said and replaced the handset. Shortly afterwards, the telephone rang again. I was pressed for time, for even seconds counted in broadcasting radio news. I picked up the receiver. At the other end of the line was the S.P. of Cuttack. He asked, "Are you going to broadcast news of that incident?" I said yes. Now his voice grew harsh, "Don't you do that." In reply I said that I was not in a position to accept his request. But he was not requesting me, he was ordering me as an S.P. Concealed in his words lay a threat. "It is the S.P. speaking. Don't include that news in the bulletin. There'll be trouble."

What trouble? Who will get into trouble? The audience? The Home Minister? Or the police? I could not understand why the police wanted to suppress the news. Maybe, they did not want the news to be broadcast during the Home Minister's stay in Orissa, for they wanted to conceal their failure to find out if there would be a demonstration and to make necessary security arrangements.

I had no time to argue with the S.P. The second and minute hands were moving relentlessly towards the appointed time of the bulletin. I told him, "I can't exclude this news item at your instance. Only three persons can order me to stop broadcasting it." Before I could name these three persons, the S.P. demanded, angrily, "Who are they?" I said, "The Director, New Services Division in Delhi, the Director of the AIR, Cuttack, and..."

"Who is the third person?" The S.P. asked with angry impatience.

I said, "The District Magistrate, who is responsible for law and order in the district. If he feels this news would cause disorder in the district. I will exclude it from the bulletin."

The S.P., whose consciousness of his powerful position

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

had rendered him crazy, fired away fresh questions, "You will obey only the District Magistrate, not the S.P.? How long have you been working at the AIR?"

I was also beginning to lose my temper. "I don't have the time. Let's stop this conversation. What? No. I can't kill a news on your orders." I put the receiver down.

A few minutes later, the uncensored news reached every corner of Orissa. After going through so much tension, I spent a lot of time sitting inside the studio. That night I went to P.V. Krishnamurthy and gave him a detailed account of what had happened.

He said to me, smiling, "They rang me after the bulletin was broadcast. Don't worry. You have done the right thing." PVK was a very prudent man. After the police rang him, he perhaps had a talk with Sivram in Delhi. A few days later, I received a letter of commendation from Sivram.

When I was working in the news section, Suren Mohanty was in charge of the drama section of AIR. While working out the schedule of plays to be broadcast, he would walk into the newsroom, sit on my table, have tea and talk. In the middle of all this he would suddenly ask me, "What play of yours should figure in this schedule?" Although I so much wanted to write a play, I was out of practice for some time, and so felt terribly diffident. But Suren babu was not to be easily deterred. A seasoned broadcaster, he knew how to extract work out of people. He would say, "Just give me the title of your play, so that I can fill in the schedule and send it to the directorate. You could give the synopsis later." This was how he would make me give him the title of a play. After this I found myself trapped. A couple of days later, he would turn up again and say, "Now, give me the synopsis of the play."

The plays I wrote while working in the news section and the plays I came to write later got published in a volume entitled *Chhota Natak* (Short Plays) in 1963 by Alok Sahitya Pratisthan. This publishing company belonged to the literary critic, Bhubaneswar Mishra. His eldest son, Satyasundar Mishra, used to manage this company, and the publication of

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Chhota Natak owed a lot to him.

In my preface to the volume I argued that many one-act plays should be more appropriately designated short plays. For the first time, I described some of the one-act plays in this collection as short plays.

Until the mid-50s, hard binding of books had not gained currency in Orissa. Not much attention was devoted to the cover designs either. Of course, there were exceptions, but this was true of all the plays, which were then published. My first play, which was published in hard cover was *August Na* (The Ninth of August). The cover of the play bore a figure symbolising the August revolution. My play, *Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja* had been published a year earlier. Its cover had been prepared by Dibakar Mishra, who produced a design by spraying colour on ordinary paper. Dibakar babu was my classmate. He was an amateur artist. He worked in the police department. After retirement, he embarked upon a career in journalism in Talcher.

Another important dimension of Dibakar's art, which led to new developments in the field of painting in Orissa, received little public attention for a long time. Dibakar never got the recognition he so eminently deserved.

Just as binding and cover design of books remained a neglected area in Orissa well into the 60s, the importance of cartoons went unappreciated in Oriya newspapers of the time. Magazines such as *Nababharat* and *Dagar* carried cartoons made by the artist, Bimbadhar Verma, and the magazine *Niankhunta* (The Firebrand) featured a few cartoons, but daily newpapers in Orissa published no cartoons at all.

However, publishing cartoons contributed by famous painters had already beome an established tradition in the national newspapers in English and in Hindi. When I was a student at Kujang High School, P. Seal's cartoons appeared once every week in *The Amrit Bazaar Patrika*. Cartoons drawn by R.K. Laxman and other artists received the attention they deserved. Sankar Pillai had become nationally and internationally famous for his cartoons, which exposed in scathing

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

ridicule political and other developments in the country. But Orissa lagged far behind the others in this respect. Dibakar babu was one of the pioneers who had come forward to remedy this deficiency in the cultural life of Orissa. Long after daily newspapers featured cartoons on a regular basis, *The Samaj* began to publish large cartoons on political matters or on some leaders. These were non-verbal comments of the artist on contemporary events, and these found great favour with reading public. The artist was none other than Dibakar babu. Soon, publishing cartoons became routine for daily newspapers.

I wanted to get Dibakar babu to design the cover for *Chhota Natak*. But since his job as a policeman kept him on the move all the time, I could not meet him. So I approached the painter, Asit Mukherjee instead. Satyasundar took me to his residence. In time, our acquaintance grew into close friendship. Asit babu designed the largest number of book covers in Orissa. Later, he became President, Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi.

If someone commissioned Asit babu to do a cover, he would enquire about the subject-matter of the book and various aspects of the design he had in his mind. Philosophical issues along with opinions relating to line, colour and technique would enter the discussion. When I asked him to design the cover for my book, he wanted to find out what its subject matter and essence were. He was no slave to any particular pattern or style. His cover design, freely blended elements from modern art movements such as cubism, expressionism, surrealism and impressionism with those of Indian art, which drew on Ravi Verma's style or our folk motifs. For him, a very thin line divided fine art from commercial art. He did not believe in labeling or in pigeonholing art. I therefore cannot categorise his cover design for *Chhota Natak*, but I can confidently claim that the design beautifully conveyed the sadness inherent in the plays. The cover design added greatly to the value of this hard-cover book.

Chhota Natak brought me good news, like the first breeze of spring wafting in with the fragrance of flowers. It was a

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

chilly evening on the 19th of November in 1966. Clouds of mist had floated in and obscured the streets. I stood at the gate of *Pathachhaya*. That evening, I was to go by train with my niece Runu to Adra, where her in-laws lived.

Someone seemed to advance towards me through layers of mist, which was feebly lit up by street lights. Who could it be? Could it be Ananta babu? His left-leaning gait, his habit of buttoning up his coat, head lowered, when he got off his car, his smiling face as he approached someone made it clear that it could be none other than him. I had grown extremely close to Ananta babu by 1966.

After the film *Kedar-Gouri* was finished, my partnership with Nitai Palit came to an end. The pleasure of making films drew Nitai babu away from the world of theatre. But I could not cut myself off from theatre. So our ways parted. The vaccuum left in my heart after he went away from me came to be filled by Ananta babu. He became my partner when he set up 'Srujani'. In 1964, the birth of Srujani heralded a new theatre movement in Orissa. Ananta babu was one of the ten persons, who got together to take this movement forward. Just as a playwright needs a director who could do justice to his play, a director looks for a play, which could meet his own intellectual standards. This necessary and natural interdependence brought the two of us very close to each other. One complemented the other. We used to meet often. But, that evening I could not figure out why he should come to me in such a hurry.

When he came up to me, he said, "Have you heard the news?" I said, bewildered, "What news?" He informed me that *Chhota Natak* had received Orissa Sahitya Akademi award. He had hurried to our house to break the good news to me. The train whistle blew. I had to rush. I could not even spend five minutes talking to him.

The memory of this incident brings in its train the memory of two other similar incidents. The second incident occurred in 1972, eight years after the first. It took place against a background crowded with events.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

By 1972, my life as a dramatist was a fairly long one. In the middle of all kinds of ups and downs I had written several plays since I wrote my first play, *Yauban* (Youth) in 1944. Except a few one-act-plays, all the plays I had written had been put on stage. And, barring *Amrutasya Putrah* (Sons of the Immortals), all my other plays had already been published. My published plays were: *Yauban, Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja, August Na, Buxi Jagabandhu, Agami* (The Future) *Abarodh* (The Siege), *Sagar Manthan* (Churning the Sea), which was adopted from a foreign play, a collection of short play *Chota Natak* and *Mahasamudra* (The Ocean), *Banahansi* (The Wild Swan) and *Aranya Fasal* (The Wild Harvest).

During 1966, three plays written by me, *Batya* (The Cyclone), *Kshudha* (Hunger), *Hillola* (The Ripples), were broadcast by the AIR. Although these constituted three acts of a single play, each act was also self-contained. I wonder why I wanted to write a trilogy like this. The first act, *The Cyclone,* was translated into other regional languages and was broadcast from different centres of AIR as part of the National Programme on Drama. Commenting on the Hindi version of the play, *The National Herald* wrote:

The national programme of the play *Vatya* was something out of the ordinary. Das had built a powerful emotional play with an undercurrent of Indian philosophy. He gives a real insight into the working of human nature in a complex situation created by man himself. Most of the action takes place in the mind of the doctor, while time for him stands still.

These three acts were put on stage together under the title *Banahansi* (The Wild Swan) by Srujani in June 1968. The play was published in book form in 1969. The impact the play made on the audience, the intelligentsia and critics was a memorable one. The production of *Banahansi* is now part of legend.

On the production, the *Amrit Bazar Patrika* had this to say:

> *Banahansi* was a revolution in thematic treatment. Many an eyebrow must have been raised to see *Banahansi* with

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

an absolutely abstract idea that represents intricate working of minds. But a change, a distinct departure in ideas, is in evidence. May be, it will prove a turning point.

The Samaj wrote: "*Banahansi* represents a bold new attempt on the Orissan stage." The *Matrubhumi* commented: "*Banahansi*, defying all existing conventions regarding writing and production of plays, has revolutionalised Oriya drama. It represents a step forward for dramaturgy in Orissa and brought the state distinction." *The Prajatantra* dwelt on the experimental character of the play: "This experiment has succeeded in creating a profound sense of reality out of an awareness of unreality, thereby inaugurating the theatre of the absurd in Orissa. The play explores the dimension of time in human life and presents the hopes, grief, and loneliness of human beings from a refreshingly different point of view. It also constitutes a departure from conventions of composition and production."

That *Banahansi* was shot and crippled without the knowledge of the general public, I came to know of it unexpectedly only in 1971.

One day I was reading the newspaper sitting on the verandah of 'Pathachhaya', with my back to the sun. A friend arrived. He was a noted Oriya literary critic, a professor of Oriya literature, a brilliant orator and an emotional and outspoken person. He appeared extremely agitated. He took out a typed letter from his pocket.

He said, angrily, "See, what the Akademi can bring itself to do?"

I was taken aback. The mention of the Akademi made me start. At the time I had already been nominated a member of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. I knew nothing about other Akademies, nor was I involved with any other Akademi in any way. So I thought something had gone wrong at the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi. But my friend had the central Sahitya Akademi in mind. He had a long story to narrate, and it concerned a certain member of the Akademi who had pierced my *Banahansi* (Wild Swan) with an arrow and left it bleeding.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

This is how the mystery that would have remained unsolved all my life unfolded itself like a flower, thanks to the grace of the Almighty.

In conformity with rules in force then, books recommended for the Akademi award were selected through a three-stage process. In the first, a list of eligible books published during the previous three years was prepared. In the second, this exhaustive list was sent to the reviewers chosen by the Akademi. In the third and final stage, a three-member jury carefully evaluated books chosen by these reviewers, before they recommended a book for the award. In the end, the executive committee of the Akademi, taking into consideration the jury's recommendations, announced the names of the award-winners. My friend had recommended my play *Banahansi* in the first stage of selection for the award in 1970. That year, the play did not receive the award. He recommended it again in 1971 in the first stage of the selection. A few of those who prepared the list during the first stage were included among the reviewers who made recommendations during the second stage. My friend was a member of the panel of reviewers in 1971. He found that *Banahansi* had been excluded from the list submitted to the reviewers. He thought that this was due to an oversight. So he wrote to the Secretary, Sahitya Akademi asking him to put it back in the list. The Secretary, Prabhakar Machwe, in his letter no. S.A. 109/8/10581, dtd 12 October 1971 said, "As for the work *Banahansi* by Sri Manoranjan Das, it was not included in the list as it was pointed out to us by some of our advisers that it was a translation of Ibsen's play *Wild Duck*."

A strange discovery was now made. My friend handed me Dr Machwe's letter. The contents of his letter left me stunned. How could a member of the advisory committee tell such a white lie? The Secretary was not to blame. It was not expected that he would read Oriya books or know Oriya authors. He simply acted on the advice received from the advisory board. The incident had taken place in the year 1970, and my play, *Banahansi* was not considered for the award for it

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

had been presented as a work of translation. As all matters relating to the award were then kept strictly confidential, no one could get wind of the evil deed perpetrated by this member of the advisory board.

A member of the advisory board deprived *Banahansi* from receiving the Akademi award, which it would certainly have got, but he could do nothing to stop the play from achieving wide fame as an original Oriya play. Later, it came to be translated into several Indian languages under the Aadan Pradan series of the NBT. *Banahansi*, recovering rapidly from the wound inflicted on it by a reckless hunter, roamed freely throughout India.

After my friend left, I went through Machwe's letter again a couple of times. I mulled over the line, which mentioned "a member of our advisory board." Two interpretations suggested themselves to me: It could be that it was not sent to the jury because someone pointed out that the play was a translation. Alternatively, the jury might have recommended it for the award, but the book was deemed ineligible for the award by the executive committee in view of the opinion of the member of the advisory board. For me what mattered most was not that the play was presented as a translation to the Akademi; what bothered me was the fact someone who was entrusted with a sacred duty by the Akademi failed in performing it. He must have done it deliberately, with the intention of depriving the play of the Akademi award.

All day long, after my friend's departure, I suffered terrible mental anguish. Many thoughts crossed my mind. But what could I have done? In 1971, I did not enjoy a position which would have made newspapers listen to me or writers fight on my behalf, asserting that, *Banahansi* was not a translation, but an original work, and therefore should be considered afresh for the award along with other books recommended that year.

That day, I had no other option but to solace myself with what the central character said in the play *Galileo* by Brecht.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Galileo I say to you: he who does not know the truth is merely an idiot. But he who knows it and calls it a lie is a criminal.

The wound left by the incident healed in course of time. On 27-28 February 1971 the Eastern Zone Writers Conference was held in Calcutta. Young writers and other culturally minded persons who were then studying or making a living in Calcutta had organised this conference. Dr Debendranath Mansingh, who later became Chief Whip of Congress party in the Orissa Legislative Assembly, was then a student of the Government Homeopathic College in Calcutta. He was one of the chief organisers of the conference. Many writers from different parts of Orissa, especially from Cuttack and Bhubaneswar, had been invited to this conference.

The highlight of the conference, which was attended by writers from Orissa, Bengal, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, was the presence of the eminent bilingual writer, Annada Sankar Ray, and a minister, Nandini Satapathy. The former presided over the inaugural function and the later graced it as the chief guest. After the inauguration, seminars on different areas of literature were held over two days.

Sriharsha Mishra, Editor, *The Samaj*, Nityananda Satapathy literary critic, Pratibha Satapathy, a poet and I myself went by train from Cuttack to attend this conference. Accommodation for us had been arranged at the M.L.A. hostel, which was situated near the Museum, in Kyd Street. Other Oriya writers such as Sachidananda Routray, Ananta Patnaik, Sitakant Mohapatra, Bibhuti Patnaik, Surendra Mohanty, Krushna Charan Behera and Mahapatra Jatindra Kumar had also been put up there. At the time, West Bengal Assembly was not in session, so the hostel was empty.

What I came to learn of the neighbourhood of the Kyd Street filled me with wonder and excitement. The newly constructed MLA hostel overlooked a gothic building, the windows and doors of which had been kept sealed and under guard. I learnt that this building was closely associated with

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the struggle for the liberation of Bangladesh led by Mujibur Rahman. In all likelihood, some confidential papers or documents relating to that struggle lay in that sealed house.

In 1971, during the Indo-Pak War the Indian army had laid under siege the Pakistan army in many parts of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) to pave the way for the victory of the Bangladesh liberation army. As the war approached its end, General Manekshaw (Later Field Marshall Manekshaw) repeatedly advised the Pakistan army to surrender. "We are marching towards Dhaka from all sides. So surrender." The Pakistan army fighting in East Pakistan did surrender. Pakistan lost its eastern arm and a new nation called Bangladesh took birth. The liberation army came victorious. Mujibur Rahman was released from a jail in Pakistan and he returned to Dhaka on 1 January 1972 by way of Delhi. The rousing reception accorded to him had made the skies of India and the new-born nation, Bangladesh resound. The radio commentaries on this had left me thrilled. It was not surprising therefore that I was fascinated when I learnt that that sealed building had something to do with the liberation struggle. I remembered that Mujibur always closed all his fiery speeches with a line from. Tagore: "I hear a voice telling me, Do not fear. One who selflessly lays down one's life knows no death."

Before I made a trip to Calcutta to take part in the conference, the thought of Sahitya Akademi award had come to occupy me although the wound caused by the *Banahansi* affair had begun to heal. Around this time, while in Cuttack, I had seen two dreams. The first dream, which I saw on 8 Novemeber 1971, I recorded in my diary. "An aeroplane was force-landed on the roof. Its pilot was a foreigner. The plane was transporting cattle. A cow gave birth to a calf. The pilot tethered the cow to a post. I remember having clearly seen the cow and its calf. The pilot pointed to me the milk flowing from the cow's udder. Some other people were also watching it. The pilot ate with me. He said to me, "The plane is safe. It will take off smoothly." I had not taken down the other dream. It was totally different from the earlier one. I dreamt that I was digging

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

a pit on a ridge in our village. I found a pot, which was full of coins.

These two dreams made me feel as if my experience illustrated Sigmund Frued's theory of dreams. Did these dreams conceal desires which lurked within my subconscious mind?

I found it difficult to believe that anyone would ever entertain a desire for a prestigious award in some corner of his or her mind. So I can never claim that I never wanted to win such an award. To say that I was immune to this temptation would amount to terrible deceit, and hypocrisy. After the *Banahansi* episode, I did want to win a Sahitya Akademi award. The awards used to be announced in winter those days. As a large number of writers had assembled in Calcutta on the occasion of the conference, the air was thick with speculation about the awards. Some bluffed so confidently and talked so knowingly that they made one feel as if they were part of that year's selection process. These included a minister, a writer who had political connections, a professor and a young novelist. But their tall talk yielded no real clues. Somehow I did not relish what they said and kept myself aloof.

The conference was formally inaugurated on 26 February. It was celebrated with great pomp. A seminar on drama was to be held the next morning. Ananta babu was to chair the session, and I was to be the chief guest. After the inaugural ceremony, some of us went to Ananta babu's Park Street residence. We set in his verandah, while a radio droned on in one of the rooms. None of us were interested in listening to the radio. The young dramatist, Kartik Rath was with us at the time. Our talk centred on how to discuss Oriya drama in the context of drama in the eastern region. Our discussion ended late at night. It was settled that I would come to Park Street half an hour before the seminar was to begin in the morning, and go to the venue of the conference with Ananta babu.

For some reason, I did not sleep well that night. At last I lulled myself to sleep thinking about how I would present my ideas at the seminar next morning. I woke up with a start at

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

dawn. The clock showed 6 AM. I was in the habit of taking tea in the morning. But I wondered if tea would be served so early at the guesthouse. I hurriedly came out of the guesthouse premises into the Kyd Street, looking for a teashop.

A short distance from the gate, tea was sold at a shed. It was one of the countless teashops in Calcutta. Here tea was not served in cups, but in small clay khuris. It got crowded very early in the morning. The babus of the locality, the local youth, businessmen on their way to the railway station or the airport, taxi drivers, rickshaw pullers—all of them enjoyed their morning tea sipping it from earthen cups. This was peculiar to the people of this metropolis. People got up from bed and came to the stall wearing lungis or loose trousers. Like the Ananda Bazar in Puri, there was no discrimination between the rich and the poor here. The pulse of the life in Calcutta could be felt here. In rainy season people spoke about the football teams of Mohan Bagan, East Bengal Club, Arian or Mohammadan Sporting. Football enthusiasts took stock of their victory or defeat. Betting also took place here. In winter, cricket fans discussed the latest scores in matches played at Eden Gardens. People also discussed politics, their discussion ranged from Bidhan Ray and Jyoti Basu to the Naxalite movement. They talked about the cultural life in Bengal. They also bought copies of the morning's newspapers and read them.

It was only six in the morning. The tea stall was yet to be crowded, when I reached there. It was late February and the winter was gradually losing its bite. There were only a couple of customers. I was taking my cup of tea in the company of those strangers. The smell of excellent Darjeeling tea was a treat to the nose. A car came from the direction of Chowranghee and stopped there. I paid no attention to it. It seemed as if a gentleman had stopped there for a cup of tea. But I was wrong. No one came out of the car. The man who was in the driver's seat, looked out and smiled at me. Who was it? Ananta babu? But why was he here at such an early hour? I was supposed to see him at his residence at 8 am. I walked towards the car and said, "We are supposed to meet at 8 o'clock?" But he kept

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

smiling. I could not make out anything and only stared at him. He opened the door, came out of the car, brought a bouquet from the back seat. Ananta babu could guess that I was confused. While offering the bouquet to me, he said, "*Aranya Fasal.*" His words gave me a start. I said, "Have they announced the Sahitya Akademi awards?"

Ananta babu replied, "Yes, when we were exchanging small talk on our verandah, the announcement was being made on the radio. Sibu informed me of this over phone late in the night." Sibu Sarkar, who worked in the Cuttack station of All India Radio, had been transferred to Calcutta. Ananta babu came to me bearing this news, and a bouquet he had bought from a florist in Park Street. He came to be associated with the news of my winning the award in this strange way.

A similar incident took place later. I had been selected for the prestigious central Sangeet Natak Akademi award for the year, 1981. It was in a way more glamorous than the Sahitya Akademi Award. Whereas Sahitya Akademi selected one book in each Indian language for the award, which is recognised by the Constitution, Sangeet Natak Akademi selected only one person in the country for an award in each department: Classical, Hindustani and Karnataki music, direction, script writing, acting, etc. One had to compete with the artists of the same department throughout the country. So it was more difficult to get a Sangeet Natak Akademi Award.

The central Sangeet Natak Akademi was established in 1952. Awards had been instituted for acting, direction and script writing in 1955, 1956 and 1961 respectively. By 1981, when I received an award for script writing, no one from Orissa had got an award either for direction or for writing. It was only Samuel Sahu, who had received the award for acting. I was thrilled when I got the news. And incidentally, the telegram, which carried the message for me, was sent by none other than Ananta babu. Was it only a coincidence that on three different occasions, Ananta babu was associated with the delivery of a piece of good news?

After the Sahitya Akademi Award for the year 1971 had

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

been announced, I developed an uncanny ability to predict the future winner of the award. After thinking deeply about something, one could know what was going to happen.

One afternoon, I chanced upon a young writer at the gate of Cuttack radio station. He had married a girl from Kujang area, which I always considered my second home, I had grown very fond of him. Suddenly I said, "You're going to get this year's Sahitya Akademi Award." He never expected this sort of prediction from me and naturally could not respond properly to my words. After exchanging small talk we went our separate way.

Sahitya Akademi Awards for the year 1972 were announced on the 2nd of January 1973. I heard the news from the radio. A few days later, I received a letter:

Sri Ma

Aurobindo Ashram
Pondicherry
January 14, 1973.

Dear Sir,

Hearty greetings for the new year, though it is already late.

I was thrilled to hear from you. Last year when we met at Cuttack, you had made a prediction. I'm not sure if you still remember it. Of course, I said nothing when you made the prediction. I remembered your words when I heard the announcement.

I value your advice. I express my sincere gratitude.

I shall go to Cuttack/Bhubaneswar in March. I shall meet you there. With regards.

Yours sincerely,
Manoj

Needless to say, Manoj Das was selected for the award for his work, *Katha O Kahani*. I wonder if the happenings were connected by an invisible thread or were random only. But after I received the Sangeeta Natak Akademi award, I wished

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

that Ananta babu and I should again meet on the stage. Ananta babu had left the stage after Srujani was closed. We met again in 1985, when my *Nandika Keshari* was produced by 'Abhinay', a dramatic club in Bhubaneswar. He agreed to direct the play.

When I sat on the balcony of Pathachhaya gazing at the sunset, my mind often wandered from the winning of Orissa Sahitya Akademi award for the work *Chhota Natak* to several other incidents. At times the mind reverted to my days at the Cuttack radio station.

When I joined the News section in 1958, I had felt a strong desire to plunge myself into the world of drama. I wrote short plays, which were later collected in the volume *Chhota Natak.* But writing it was no more than seeding my ambition to become a playwright. The seed grew into a tree in 1961, when I switched to the Drama section of AIR as a producer. Probably it was preordained. I got this feeling through the many vicissitudes of my life.

Perhaps my coming to the Drama Section was preordained. On several occasions I have felt that destiny played such a role in my life.

An interview was conducted to fill up this post. U.L. Barua from Assam was the head of the All India Radio station at Cuttack at the time. A number of people, who had established themselves in the fields of literature and drama, were candidates. A few experienced employees of the radio station were also keen for the job. A high-level committee was constituted to conduct the interview and select the candidate. A representative of the Director General, who came from Delhi, was the Chairman. I considered a selection through an interview like this as winning a lottery. Qualification was not the sole criterion; luck also played a crucial role here.

In the interview, first a few conventional questions were asked. A copy of my bio-data lay before each member. I was nervous. A few years ago, before starting my law practice, I had applied for a job in the DPI office. I had more than the required qualification for that post. I thought, if I got this job, I could manage with my earnings till I set up a practice. A

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

lecturer in Oriya, who was very close to the DPI, was a member of the interview board. I had a cordial relationship with this person. But he asked strange questions to me: "You write plays, don't you? What have you written?" I said, "Yes" and mentioned the titles of the plays. The other member of the board was impressed: "O, You've written so many plays." Probably he knew nothing of literature. I had nothing to say in reply. I wondered about his general knowledge but chose to keep quiet. But the lecturer friend had not done with asking his questions. He said, "I've heard there is psychoanalysis in your play *Agami.*" I only gazed at him. He continued, "Give me an example, where there is psychological analysis." I tried to explain, "A few characters have been portrayed from the angle of human psychology." He interrupted, "No, no, give me an example." I could not control myself and burst out, "A psychological state is not like a mark on the body, which I can show you and say, it is there in this page or that scene." My interview came to an abrupt end and I left the place. He had to ask this question because he was asked to do so by his higher authority. This was done keeping a particular candidate's selection in mind.

I recalled this incident while the Chairman was going through my bio-data in the office room of the Station Director of All India Radio. He raised his head and asked me, "Have you read any play by a western playwright?"

I said, "Yes,"

"A few Indian plays?"

"Very few. Not many plays have been translated into English."

"American plays?"

"Yes."

He then asked me a couple of questions about a few American plays: Eugene O'Neill's *Marco Millian*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*, Tennessee William's *A Street Car Named Desire*. I said that I had read the plays. We discussed these plays and the discussion was quite cordial. At times we held different views and did not agree

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

with each other. Once I said emphatically, "No Sir, You are wrong. Please go through the play again." The next moment I became conscious of the situation. I was facing an interview board, after all. I forgot the time, place and situation when I got into an argument about the plays. I have not yet been able to get rid of this habit. After I became conscious, I felt apprehensive and looked at the face of the Chairman to guess his reaction. He smiled. "Okay", he said and looked at the other members of the board. Others did not ask me any questions. I took leave of them.

It was my good luck that I got selected. Otherwise the Chairman would not have asked me questions about the plays which I had read and there would have been no opportunity to discuss those plays. What would have happened if he had asked me about the plays which I had not gone through? I was face to face with my destiny. I had to obey its command.

I was selected. I left the News Section and came to the Drama Section. Life and livelihood became one. I had been dreaming of this opportunity for many years. Finally it was fulfilled.

After joining the Drama Section, I became a part of the mainstream of the radio station. I came to a place, where one could raise the standard of a programme. Every morning a programme meeting was held in the office. As the producer, I had to attend the meetings. Attending this meeting was a status symbol those days.

Broadcasting in India started on a limited scale in 1927, when the Indian Broadcast Company Ltd. was established. This company was dissolved in 1930. The same year, Indian State Broadcast Service was started. In 1934, Lionel Fielden of the BBC came to India for developing Indian broadcasting. In 1936, a radio station was set up in New Delhi. Fielden, who was all in all so far as broadcasting was concerned, returned to England in 1940. After Fielden it was Bokhari, who was in charge. At the time of partition, Bokhari went to Pakistan. This was a brief history of Indian broadcasting before independence. After that, All India Radio was renamed Akashvani, which

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was the name of the Mysore state radio station.

I do not know if programme meetings were held everyday in the pre-independence period, during the days of Fielden and Bokhari. But in course of time, this arrangement became a regular feature of all radio stations in the country. Such meetings stood comparison with 'Indra Sabha' i.e. 'Indra's durbar'. Like King Indra, the Station Director presided over the durbar, which was attended by producers, and programme executives, who could be compared with gods and goddesses. The head of the News Section and that of the Engineering Section attended the meeting once a week. Discussions were held chiefly on three subjects: (a) Programmes already broadcast during the last twentyfour hours, (b) checking of programmes to be broadcast during the next twentyfour hours and (c) other matters, if any.

There was nothing under the sun, which did not get discussed at the Indra sabha under the miscellaneous items. The news published in the dailies were talked about here; the directions issued by the Director General were discussed; difficulties faced by different sections in course of doing their jobs came up for discussion. The quarterly schedules prepared by each section were presented here, and were modified, if necessary, in the light of suggestions from others during an open discussion; it was decided here which authors should be commissioned for an important programme; invariably the right choice was made in the end. For all practical purposes, the Indra sabha functioned like a cabinet of the government of AIR, it provided space also for discussion of personal problems. Every day, it was held at an appointed time. One was required to be there on the dot.

From P.V. Krishnamurthy's time, a pleasant punishment was inflicted on all late-comers to the meeting of the deities. Even the lord of the deities, the Station Director himself, was not exempted from this. A late-comer had to treat the others to tea or snacks. This system of punishment, which we had willingly imposed on ourselves, was an interesting and enjoyable experience. This made us value punctuality. The

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

employees of AIR worked with clock-work precision at the time.

AIR, Cuttack played a memorable part in the cultural reawakening of Orissa. The country had attained independence only a few months before the radio station was set up in Cuttack. After independence, people belonging to different states in India, which had been formed on a linguistic basis, started vying with each other to establish the superiority of their respective cultures. Each of them strove to discover their cultural identities, and to make others aware of these.

Broadcasting provided the most suitable means for showcasing one's cultural treasures. From the day of its inception, Cuttack radio station made an effort to set itself up as a mirror of the rich culture of Orissa. The programme broadcast on the first day reflected its faith in the nation and its deep affection for Orissa. On that day, the nation was greeted with the song 'Bande Mataram.' In a separate programme broadcast on the same day, Mother Orissa was paid a tribute through a song which ran as follows:

I salute you, Mother Orissa.
You, whose smile is sweet
and whose words are beautiful.
Your body is washed by the blue sea,
Whose shore is lined with palm and tamal trees.
A cool breeze blows over the banks of your sacred rivers.

The song 'Bande Mataram' written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya was rendered by Radharani, a famous singer from Calcutta. The song 'Bande Utkal Janani', composed by Kantakabi Lakshmikanta Mohapatra, was sung in chorus by Sunanda Patnaik, Arati Patra, Arati Kar, Basanti Mishra, Manorama Mahanti, and Purnima, who were then all upcoming young artists. A symbolic union of Mother India and Mother Orissa had taken place on that occasion. One complemented the other. The identity of Orissa expressed itself through the larger identity of India. From the very beginning, an attempt was made to plant the love of one's

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

country in the mind of the masses.

I had the good fortune on that day of reading the first Oriya news bulletin in Delhi. This was relayed from Cuttack. The function was inaugurated by the then Governor of Orissa, Dr Kailashnath Katju. The Chief Guest was the Premier of the State, Harekrushna Mahtab. Jatin Das and Nayan Kishore Mohanty announced the programmes. The artists who took part in the music programme included Bhubaneswar Mishra (violin), Bimalkant Acharya (tanpura), Jagabandhu Das (violin), Bijili Kumar Sen (esraj) Abhimanyu Nayak, Dhrubacharan Sahoo, B. Pal and Radhagobind Ghosh. The programme that day featured an old devotional song in Oriya and a Hindi song, which were rendered by the Odissi singer, Shyam Sundar Kar and Banikantha Nimai Charan Harichandan respectively. The programme also included a comedy *Purohitanka Mana* (The Priest's Pride) written by Chakradhar Mohapatra. Jatin Das, Chandrasekhar Mishra, Baikunthanath Mohanty, and Udayanath Sahu participated in it.

The programme had other highlights, too. Miss Sanjukta Mohanty recited a poem for children. A play, *Pallishri,* which was written by the famous poet, Mayadhar Mansingh was broadcast that day, in which featured Kartik Kumar Ghosh, Durllabh Chandra Singh, Samuel Sahu, Nanda Kishore Das, Nayan Kishore Mohanty, Gobinda Chandra Rath and Sridhar Jethy. It was directed by Dilip Kumar Sengupta and Y. M. Rao. The lyrics for the play *Boita Bandana* were written by Kali Charan Patnaik. On that day, an excerpt from Utkalamani Gopabandhu Das's poem *Dharmapada,* was broadcast. The noted singer Balakrushna Dash sang an Odissi song, "*Chandranana, Aja eki gumanare* ?" (Why are you so put off, you whose face is lovely like the moon?). In the group discussion held on Oriya folk songs Sumati Devi, Indulata Devi, Bidyutlata Devi, Balaram Mishra, Sadanand Patnaik, Baishnab Charan Panda, Dukshiram Swain, Dayanidhi Tripathy, and Brundaban Bisoi took part. The first day's programme concluded with the song '*Azad Hindusthan*' written by Banchanidhi Mohanty, sung in chorus by Sulakshana Mohanty, Binapani

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Rath, Pratima Mishra, Brajeswari Devi, Sanjukta Mohanty, Ramakant Mohapatra, Bhubanananda Mishra and Bipin Behari Mohanty.

The pattern established by this programme came to be followed by those organised in subsequent years. Gradually, our cultural treasures floated upto the surface, like foam on a river in spate. The programmes featured a large number of Odissi songs, *chhandas, champus,* devotional songs, and folk songs. They also included Oriya plays, operas, *das kathia,* Sambalpuri folk songs. Great Oriya poets such as Upendra Bhanja, Baladev Rath, Abhimanyu, Gopal Krishna, Dinakrushna, Bhima Bhoi, who had been largely forgotten, became once again familiar to the listeners. For the listeners, great poets like Sarala Das, Banamali Das, Jagannath Das and Balaram Das became a living presence. The programmes brought many luminaries like Fakir Mohan, Radhanath, Bhaktakabi Madhusudan, Utkalgourab Madhusudan (Mr Das) closer to the people. Festivals of Orissa such as the Car Festival now found a place in the programmes broadcast by AIR. Special care was taken to bring famous places in the state to the notice of the general public. People were reminded of the glorious past of Orissa by paying glowing tributes to great heroes of the past.

This phase was crucial to the task of laying the foundation for future programmes. In those days, anyone who joined AIR, Cuttack looked upon himself or herself as a cultural ambassador of Orissa and worked for the development of its art and literature. Sixteen years after I joined AIR for the second time, I went in 1974 to work under the Government of Orissa on deputation. These sixteen years, without doubt, constitute the golden age of Cuttack radio station.

Methods different from those employed now were used to record programmes as the technology had not reached its present-day level at the time. Tapes or cassettes were not used. As a result, it was not easy to store a programme. Programmes were recorded on gramophone discs, which were cut with the help of old-fashioned techniques. It was impossible to get

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

programmes of long duration in these discs. These presented another difficulty, too. The advantage of erasing a part of a programme, if anything went wrong while recording it in a tape-recorder, was not available in the case of discs. If things went wrong during a recording, a new disc had to be prepared. For this reason, only programmes of short duration, or effects were recorded in discs. This was the practice until tape-recorders came to be used in AIR. Before this, programmes were broadcast live from the station. These live broadcasts demanded sincerity and alertness from the producer of the programme, as well as from the artists, for if some wrong word escaped one's lips, or if the instruments played something slightly out of tune, they found their way straight to the ears of the listeners. Nevertheless, these live broadcasts were full of life. For a few years my colleagues and I had to broadcast our plays and features live.

Three crucial events in the history of the country took place during the years I worked for the AIR: the Chinese invasion of India in 1962; the Indo-Pak war in 1965; and the military action of the Indian army under the leadership of General Manekshaw, which led to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.

For a nation at war, the media has always been a potent force. It serves to weaken the enemy and to strenghten to the will power of the nation. During all the three wars, this task had been ably and admirably discharged by the AIR. As a matter of fact, each one of us at the AIR had turned himself or herself into a soldier giving battle. Every section strove to produce new programmes. Patriotic songs were composed by the music section. The Spoken word section regularly organised special discussions in which invited guests took part. The news section, under its news analysis programme, offered detailed discussion of daily developments in the battlefront, emphasizing our victories and successes. During the war in 1971, when the Indian troops were marching towards Dhaka, Bijoy Mangaraj's daily 'Comment,' which was broadcast by the news section, was the audience's delight.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

During all the three wars, we, who worked in the Drama Section, had to produce plays, which would boost the morale of the masses. During the Indo-China war, we produced one or two extra features based on the daily reports from the front. On some days, it would so happen that we could not leave the studio to have our lunch. The features were written by Gopal babu, Samuel babu, Narasingh Mohapatra and I, myself, and we took turns to produce them. The artists who lent their voices to these features included Radharani Bose, Sibu Sarkar, Debikarani Bose, and, sometimes, Binapani Mohanty. All of them were staff artists of AIR. Occasionally, noted lady artists like Adaramani Baral were brought in on a contract basis. The recording for one programme started as soon as the one preceding it had been recorded. The noons at Madhupur House were full of fun during the rehearsals and recordings of these features. Whenever the worn out air conditioner of Madhupur House stopped working, Sibu Sarakar would cast his shirt off his back to escape the oppressive heat of the studio and jump all over the place shouting place names like Sheela, Bomdilla, Tawang, which recurred in the script. His fellow-artist, Radharani, would double up, laughing. It was difficult for her to stop once she burst into laughter.

During the war, all members of staff associated with the production of programmes, worked away, as if possessed. The days were really exciting and enjoyable.

In those years the employees of the AIR at Cuttack were part of a large family. The strong ties of affection which had bound them to each other were felt with particular force on one festive occasion every year, the Durga Puja. A special feature called *Sri Durga* was broadcast every year in the moonlit fortnight of the month of Aswin to pay homage to Goddess Durga.

Ya Devi Sarbabhuteshu Saktirupena sansthita
Namastasuei Namastasuei
Namastasuei Namonamah.

This programme used to be broadcast live from the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

studio at dawn. This was highly favoured by the audience. Not only in villages, in every house, wherever there happened to be a radio set, groups of people sat enjoying this special feature and paid homage to Goddess Durga.

We used to reach the studio while it was still dark, before the programme started. The great comedian, Krushna Chandra Pande would apply perfumed sanḍal paste on our foreheads. The studio would be filled with the smell of flowers, joss sticks and flowers. Those moments were truly magical. The programme always commenced at the appointed time.

The text for this programme was always written by Kabichandra Kalicharan Patnaik. The hymn to the Goddess Chandi was recited by Nayan Kishore Mohanty. Nayan babu, who was a handsome person, stood before the microphone after taking his bath and recited the hymn with the greatest concentration. Like the limpid waters of the Ganga cascading out of the matted hair of Lord Shiva, clearly articulated Sanskrit and Oriya words poured from his lips. The musical part of the programme was the responsibility of the music director, Bhubaneswar Mishra. Handpicked staff artists sang the songs for this feature. They included Balakrushna Dash, Akshay Mohanty, Sikandar Alam, Pranab Patnaik, Radhakrishna Bhanja, Radhagobind Patnaik, Bina Devi, Arati Mishra and Shyamamani Patnaik. When he was Director, AIR, Cuttack, P.V. Krishnamurthy contributed to this programme by playing *ghatam*. Nayan Kishore Mohanty's fame as a reciter of the hymn to Goddess Chandi came to be as widespread as that of Biren Bhadra of AIR, Calcutta, who recited the hymn in the feature written by Bani Kumari. However, these good things did not last long. Live broadcast of the dawn programme on the eve of the Dussera festival came to be discontinued. The Goddess was ushered in, in the light of not a ghee-filled earthen lamp, but by the light of an electric torch. She was offered plastic flowers instead of fresh ones. The dawn programme was managed anyhow.

However, there was another programme, which could not be broadcast with the help of a tape recorder. This was the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

running commentary on the Car Festival at Puri. This was not only the Cuttack radio-station's most popular programme, it was an annual reminder to the Oriya race of its glorious cultural heritage. The programme had already been initiated by the time I joined AIR. I myself had to provide the commentary on two occasions. The programme reflected various dimensions of the cult of Lord Jagannath. It made use of examples from the writings of ancient Oriya writers. Many distinctive customs and rites, festivals and legends which made their way into Oriya life through Lord Jagannath, a symbol of equality and amity, came to be discussed during this programme. The commentary expanded to include discussion on scriptures, religion and philosophy.

Distinguished writers, journalists and scholars of Orissa were invited to provide the commentary. Erudite scholars like Artaballabh Mohanty, Gouri Kumar Brahma, Sadasiv Rath Sharma and Raj Kishore Ray took part in this programme. Every year, on this sacred occasion, this programme reminded millions of spell-bound listeners of the glorious cultural and artistic traditions of Orissa. It also reminded them that the saviour of Orissa was none other than Lord Jagannath, who rises above all distinctions of caste, creed and colour.

Not only Dussera or the Car Festival, several other festivals of Orissa found a place in the programmes of AIR. The Kumar Utsav is celebrated in every Oriya household, but it was in Cuttack that an attempt was first made to present it as a beautiful reflection of the rich cultural life through dance, songs and drama. The Kumar Utsav Samiti came to be formed in 1952. A number of young women, who had brought new life to dance, came forward to cooperate with this organisation. The Samiti also received support from many singers, young and old, and from famous amateur actors and actresses. The organisation flourished with the help of artists who included Balakrushna Dash, Bhubaneswar Mishra, Suren Mohanty, Nayan Kishore Mohanty, Govind Tej, Ramakant Mohapatra, Nabakishore Mohanty, Suresh Patnaik, Sukanta Das, Narasingh Mohapatra, Kailash Chandra Mohapatra,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Nandakrushna Das, Bina Devi and Jasodhara Das.

I had a very warm and cordial relationship with this organisation. I had written a comedy entitled *Atithi* (The Guest) on the occasion of the Kumar Utsav, which was held at Saheed Bhawan in Cuttack. The central character was played by Sibu Sarakar. For the Utsav which was held in the premises of Ravenshaw Collegiate School, I had written a play entitled *Bhadralok* (The Gentleman) in imitation of a play written by the famous French playwright, Moliere. Different characters in the play were played by Sibu, Radharani and Debika. Nandakrushna Das, a police officer who had earned fame as an athlete at the national level, felt drawn to the play and came forward to act in it. Govind Tej had made arrangement for the special lighting of the stage. A lot of emphasis was laid on dance and songs in the programme relating to Kumar Utsav. When P.V. Krishnamurthy took over as Director, AIR, Cuttack, the Utsav received full cooperation from the radio station. It came to be broadcast live from AIR.

Initially, Kumar Utsav was celebrated at Nari Seba Sangh, Cuttack. Later, the celebration was held at different places: Annapurna theatre, Janata theatre, Sahid Bhawan or Ravenshaw Collegiate School campus. More and more people came to see it as the years went by. So there was a problem of space. The function came to be held at the open air stage at Barabati Stadium. People watched the programme spell-bound. But, the organisers could not manage the function on such a large scale. It had to be discontinued in the end. But it had fulfilled its main objective. Kumar Utsav celebrations came to be held at different places in Orissa. Through Kumar Utsav, a desire to hold a collective cultural celebration on a single day could be fulfilled.

Special programmes on radio were arranged on different festivals those days. The music section broadcast special programmes on occasions like Diwali and Holi. Besides broadcasting the programmes, we also used to celebrate Holi as a social function. On the eve of Holi, the employees organised a family get-together, to which a few important guests were

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

invited. People applied *abira* on each other's forehead on this occasion.

An important highlight of the function was the conferment of a title. In olden days, kings used to confer titles on a chosen few. These titles included 'Tarka Bachaspati', 'Baliar Singh' and 'Kabi Tilak', etc. In India, the British monarch introduced several titles similar to the knighthood in Britain: 'Raybahadur', 'Raysaheb', 'Khan Bahadur', 'Khan Saheb', etc. In free India, 'Padma' titles are bestowed on people in recognition of their achievements in various fields. At times, titles formed a part of the name of certain eminent persons: Rabindranath was called 'Kabiguru', Upendra Bhanj 'Kabi Samrat', Fakirmohan, 'Vyasakabi', Gopabandhu, 'Utkalmani' and Madhusudan Rao, 'Bhaktakabi'.

The titles conferred on persons as a part of our Holi celebrations were different from these. They were in keeping with the Holi mood. The title to be given was kept a closely guarded secret till the very last moment. The chief guest, who would be the recipient of the Holi title, was given a warm welcome as soon as he arrived at the main gate. He was made to wear a many-coloured cap on his head. 'Abir' was applied to his forehead. The title was announced in a mock-heroic style. Finally, the guest declared that he accepted the title.

Only persons who achieved remarkable successes in their respective fields were considered for these titles. The title of 'Rasika Kalakaumudi' was bestowed on Harekrushna Mahtab. The people who received titles in different years included Nityananda Mohapatra (Swami Nandphandji), Surendra Mohanty (Lekhanidhari Ajnanamari Maharaj), Biju Patnaik (Kalinga Kalanidhi Udanchhu), Gopinath Mohanty (Madalanath Bansihatji), Radhanath Rath (Sambadkat Badhanath) and Janaki Ballav Patnaik (Aridalan Hasyabadan). Nadiabihari Mohanty, who was famous as the 'Badabhai' (Elder brother) of the 'Sisu Sansar' (Children's world) radio programme, took a leading part in organising the Holi celebrations. Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, the eminent Oriya poet and novelist, gave the final shape to the titles. It was difficult

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

to assess how the people took the sarcasm concealed in the funny titles bestowed on them. But everyone took them in a sportive spirit.

A lot of sincere efforts went into the radio programmes. Chaste language was used as far as possible. Kalindi babu saw to the language of the talks, songs and the announcement of programmes. All India Radio also laid emphasis on the important aspect of pronounciation. Producers looked into all these aspects at the time of rehearsals. If any mistakes occurred, they were discussed in the meeting. Gradually things slackened and the standard of programmes declined.

The first phase of my career in the All India Radio (1958-73) was very enjoyable for me. My plays and collections of plays such as *Chhota Natak, Sagar Manthan, Mahasamudra, Banahansi, Arnya Fasal, Amrutasya Putrah, Katha Ghoda, Urmi* and *Ababahikara Swapna* were written during this period. I was closely associated with the leading literary and drama institutions of the state. I was nominated a member of the executive body of Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi. I also joined the General Council of the Central Shitya Akademi as a member. I was elected to the executive body for a five-year term.

A learned scholar and a National Professor Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, who was regarded as a living encyclopaedia, was then the President of Sahitya Akademi. Professor K.R. Srinivas Iyengar was its Vice-President. Suniti babu, who was a man of calm diposition, gave a new direction to the Akademi. Representatives of twenty-two languages took part in its meetings. Discussions took place in English and Hindi. The Bengali poet, Subhas Mukhopadyay was the only exception. He spoke only in Bengali. Suniti babu loved me dearly and called me *chhota bhai* (younger brother). He spoke to me in Bengali and I spoke to him in Oriya. He understood Oriya perfectly well and could even speak chaste Oriya. His towering personality attracted me towards him.

Utkal Sahitya Samaj has a long history of popularising modern Oriya literature. It took its birth, along with Utkal Sammilani in 1903. The institution flourished through the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

efforts of established litterateurs such as Madhusudan Rao, Gouri Shankar Ray, Mrutyunjay Rath, Radhanath Ray, Chandra Mohan Maharana, Biswanath Kar and Nanda Kishore Bal. Initially, the institution did not have its own building. Its general body meetings were held in places like Cuttack Training School, Town Hall and Victoria School. Shriram Chandra Bhavan was built in 1926. Maharaja Purna Chandra Bhanj of Mayurbhanj bore the expenses of the construction, and the building was named after his father. Utkal Sahitya Samaj agreed to the condition laid down by Maharaja Purna Chandra that no political meetings were to be held in the hall.

By the time I came to be associated with Utkal Sahitya Samaj, Shriram Chandra Bhavan had been the central place for all the important literary meetings held in Cuttack. The meetings, which took place here, played a key role in giving Oriya literature an emotional unity. Almost all the people who had some interest in Oriya literature came to be associated with this premier institution.

I attended almost all the meetings of Utkal Sahitya Samaj during the period I was one of its office-bearers. Later, whenever I visited Shriram Chandra Bhavan, the memory of those days would come alive. It seemed as if the dead appeared before me; someone moving in the corridors, or someone else pulling a chair and sitting in the hall. Kalindi Charan Panigrahi used to enter the hall, smiling. Dr Mayadhar Mansingh used to sit quietly. Sarat Mukherji came there dressed in a suit. Baikuntha Patnaik, in his dhoti and punjabi, leaned forward a little while walking. Balakrushna Patnaik visited the place, walking stick in hand. In a white khaddar sari, Sarala Debi gossipped. Surya Narayan Dash used to drag his tired feet from Nanda Deula to Shriram Chandra Bhavan. Ananta Prasad Panda would speak to someone, his back resting on his walking stick. Sridhar Mohapatra would sit quietly on the front row. Murari Mohan Jena would be busy making arrangements for the meeting. Sudhakar Patnaik would sit silently in some remote corner of the hall.

After I left for Bhubaneswar and joined the Orissa Sahitya

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Akademi and Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi, I could not maintain my contact with Utkal Sahitya Samaj. After a few years in Bhubaneswar, when I came back to Cuttack, I could not visit *the Samaj* as often as I wanted to. Whenever I went there, I did not meet my old friends.

Some of the events that took place when I was one of the office-bearers of Utkal Sahitya Samaj are still fresh in my memory. These include the celebration of the diamond jubilee of the Samaj, which took place in 1972. At the time, the poet Anant Patnaik was the President of the Samaj, and I was its Vice-President. The two secretaries were Bichitrananda Kar, the Editor of *Matrubhumi*, and the veteran journalist, Nagen Beuria. The executive committee members included Kahnu Charan Mohanty, Anant Prasad Panda, Kunja Behari Dash, Pathani Patnaik, Murari Mohan Jena, Binapani Mohanty, Benudhar Rout, Satyapriya Mohapatra, Paramananda Adhikari, Ramahari Mishra and Bhagaban Nayak Burma.

To make the function a great success, distinguished persons such as Dr Pranakrishna Parija, Harekrushna Mahtab, Radhanath Rath, Editor, *Samaj*, Rajendra Narayan Singhdeo, Nandini Satapathy, Kalicharan Patnaik, Sachidanand Routray, Nirmala Devi, Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Dr Mayadhar Mansingh and Sarala Debi were persuaded to act as its patrons. This function, which was held in the packed auditorium of the Cuttack Club in Barabati Stadium, was in fact an humble offering made at the feet of Saraswati, the goddess of learning, by the writers of Orissa.

After I joined as a drama and features producer in AIR, Cuttack I not only found an opportunity to associate myself with cultural institutions, I also got to visit many places of interest and new townships and industrial areas. It was all part of my work. I got an opportunity to interact with several important persons. Well-known Oriya actors, actresses and writers apart, I had the good fortune to meet almost everyone who mattered. The places I visited during this period, the interesting incidents I witnessed, the experiences I went through, the landscapes I set my eyes on remain indelibly etched in my

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

memory. They would suddenly open a window in my mind, and appear like stars on the twilight sky, like *Jahni* flowers coming into bloom on an autumn afternoon. I would remember small remote villages I had visited, the ancient monuments of Orissa, the industrial projects. I could not forget the vast expanse of the forest in Dandakaranya, Koraput, Jeypore. Memories of past experiences rose to the surface like bubbles. Memories of moments of ecstasy would fill me with excitement.

Once I made a trip to Therubali to make a documentary on the ferro-silicon factory of IMFA. Our car sped in the dark along the newly-built road which ran through the forest past. I was accompanied by two officers who included Markas babu, the Public Relations Officer, IMFA. Suddenly the driver slowed the car down and whispered, "Sir, look into the jungle on your left side." Two points of bright light shone among the rows of trees. These were no ordinary lights; they were the eyes of a tiger 'burning bright'. It was keeping pace with the car, taking a parallel course. At some turning, the headlight fell on its face. The medium-sized tiger stopped dead, and stared at us. Perhaps the headlight had left it dazzled. Then it turned away and disappeared into the forest. Oh, what an experience it was to come face to face with a tiger in the middle of a forest at the dead of night. It brought Blake's lines to my mind:

Tiger, Tiger ! burning bright
In the forests of night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame this fearful symmetry?

Jirang is a little known place in South Orissa. It lies a few kilometers away from Gunupur. It was 1965. This tribal dominated area was extremely difficult to access at the time.

One day I was having a talk with Mrutyunjay Patra, who was a horticulture officer, in the Directorate of Agriculture. I said, "The Pinola fruit Juice marketed by your Department has become a very popular brand in the market. It is selling well." He informed me that the soil and the climate in some

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

parts of Ganjam and Koraput were ideal for growing fruit trees. He said, "A factory for producing fruit juice has been set up at Jirang by the Government. The tribals living in the villages in the neighbourhood are being encouraged to plant orange trees in their back gardens and their fields. They sell their oranges to the factory and earn good money. This has enabled them to escape the clutches of the moneylenders. Why don't you make a feature (Documentary) on our fruit juice scheme and the factory at Jirang?"

A few years ago I had seen an orange grove in Angul, and that had brought to my mind the commercial cultivation of orange in Nagpur. I readily agreed to Patra's proposal. In no time, he got the Orissa Government to extend all necessary facilities to me. Samuel Nayak and I myself set off for Jirang. Just before we reached Jirang, we found the last fifteen or twenty kilometers of the road in a very bad state. A jeepable, unmetalled road had been carved out of the jungle. We had a bumpy ride along this road, and at last arrived at a one-room dak bungalow having an asbestos roof, which stood on an out crop of rock and lay close to the fruit juice factory in Jirang.

We spent three days there. Jirang was not a big village. There were no other villages nearby. The nearest village lay four or five kilometers away. To reach one of these, one had to climb or get around a hill walking through the forest or negotiating forest paths. When we reached Jirang, the village was agog with excitement. A large number of men and women came to have a look at us. "The radio people have come from Cuttack. The radio will broadcast a programme about our village." Bisoi, the headman of the village, owned a radio. He was overwhelmed with joy when we recorded an interview with him. Later, he called a few fellow villagers and got the interview replayed for their benefit. In his interview, he said that he was the 'mutha head' of his village. The land in the area had not been settled yet. The 'mutha head' would point to whatever piece of land he liked to a ryot, and the man would come to own, and till it. This 'mutha head' used to extend his support to various government projects. He persuaded the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

tribals to plant lime trees, and to bring their fruits to the juice factory. He also settled disputes in the area. Many of the inhabitants of Jirang were Christians. Bisoi told us that religious conflicts were never heard of in the village in the past. Many were even unable to tell the two religions, Hinduism and Christianity, apart. Hindus and Christians celebrate their festivals together. Bisoi had received some education. He had passed the middle school examination. He peppered his sentences with an occasional English word. He also owned a country gun.

The recording feature was over and necessary data for the script were collected the next day in the morning. While exchanging small talk with the 'mutha head' after our midday meal, I said, "Why stay here for two days? We should leave tomorrow in the morning." He protested, saying, "No sir. Please stay for two days more." It was the third week of April. It was unbearably hot in Cuttack; but Jirang was comparatively less hot. The village was ringed by wooded hills, and was bisected by a small river, which was almost dry. Our dak bungalow stood right at the centre of this circle of hills. A few villagers also came and joined us in our conversation. Suddenly it seemed as if darkness descended on the bright summer afternoon as it did during a solar eclipse. The air grew cooler. I stood up and looked about me. From all directions clouds were rolling over toward Jirang, brushing past the peaks of the hills. Within a few minutes, the clouds blotted out the sun, and large drops of rain came hurtling down from the sky. At this moment, I saw an extraordinary sight, which I had never seen before, and I doubt if I would ever see one such in future. Jirang resounded with the cries of peacocks ecstatically welcoming the clouds and the rain. Flocks of them rose in a group a few feet from the crest of a hill, and again came down and settled on it. Millions of peacocks and peahens danced on the hills, spreading their tails, and created the illusion of a vast circular floating wing hovering over the hills. The sight took my breath away. We took it in, wide-eyed with wonder. The clouds dispersed soon afterwards. The tails and the feet of the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

dancing peacocks became still and they disappeared into the undergrowth. The pale light of the afternoon flooded Jirang once more. The 'mutha head' remarked, 'Sir, this happens almost every day in summer. Whenever a drop of rain falls from the sky, the peacocks dance like mad. They hop into the sky, and come back and sit on the hill-top.'

Jirang enthralled me, as the pale afternoon gave way to dim twilight. I said to Bisoi, "I did want to leave tomorrow morning, but I will spend two more days here. Who knows I may not get a second chance to visit Jirang." Bisoi said, "Sir, I have a gun. Can you see those small plots of land down below?" In the gathering darkness, they looked like moles on a human face. He went on, "Deer come to these fields at night. It is already evening. I'll go and make an 'adi' there. We'll go hunting tonight after our meal. I have a big electric torch. When everything becomes quiet, the deer will descend on the fields to graze."

True to his word, he reappeared at ten, and said, "Sir, let's go." We spent some time sitting on the 'adi' waiting for the prey. But we sighted none. The next day, Bisoi came and said, "Sir, you are not used to sit quietly on an 'adi' made of palm fronds. It's good you left early. We were unlucky yesterday. For some strange reason, the deer did not come to any field yesterday night. All night, there was no sound of their stirring anywhere. But never mind. You will be my guest tonight. The goat will be killed in my presence."

We had our dinner at the 'mutha head's house that night. He laid out two leaves and lovingly served us food. Two big bell metal bowls full of meat curry were placed before us. But the moment I put a little of this curry into my mouth, my stomach turned and I felt like throwing up. The situation was so awkward I could not say anything to Samuel babu. Bisoi felt upset when he noticed that we were not eating the meat curry. "Why aren't you eating, Sir? Do you find it too salty?" We could not give him a reply. Samuel babu asked him tactfully, "You got the goat butchered in your presence?" Bisoi seemed dumb-founded. "How could I serve you ordinary goat

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

meat? I took great pains to find the largest billy goat and got it killed in my presence."

Now everything became clear. In this part of Orissa, meat meant the meat of a castrated goat. The smell of the meat of a billy goat so overpowered us that we could not do justice to the curry the 'mutha head' had prepared for us with such care and affection. All the same, Jirang was an unforgettable experience. The floating circle of peacock tails, the curry made of billy goat meat, the mutha head, the night spent hiding on an 'adi' waiting for herds of deer—these memories will never ever fade from my mind. Maybe, the memory of this 'adi' rose from the depths of my sub-conscious and entered my play *Aranya Fasal*. In it, the chowkidar prepares an 'adi' for Burma sahib, when he goes out to shoot a tiger.

I also had to go out of Orissa sometimes on work. But not all trips were pleasant ones. On occasions, I came back feeling deeply pained and aggrieved. The pain stayed with me for a long time. Without my being aware of it, it found expression in my plays. I was witness to one such painful incident during the time when Asfaque Hussain was the Director, AIR, Cuttack.

Asfaque Hussain took over as Director, AIR, Cuttack in September 1962. He headed the station at a time when the nation was passing through a period of crisis. In October 1962, China invaded India. On 27 May 1964, Nehru passed away soon after his visit to Orissa. The Indo-Pak war took place in 1965. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Indian army fought heroically and marched as far as Ichhagol canal in Lahore. In January 1966, Shastri died in Tashkent while taking part in the negotiations for peace. Asfaque Hussain left Cuttack in April 1966. His tenure at the AIR was an eventful one. At this hour of crisis in the life of the nation, we got an opportunity to prove that providing entertainment was not the sole aim of the AIR. We produced programmes, which created awareness in people and gave them courage at a time when the country had fought two wars and lost two Prime Ministers in a short span of time.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

May be, this was the first time since the AIR was established that, it gave a very good account of itself. As a human being, Asfaque Hussain was something of an exception. He never made AIR artists perform at government functions, nor did he cultivate newspaper editors out of fear.

He was a huge man, tall and plump. He resembled Churchill, the former British Premier, in almost every respect except the colour of his skin. He did not wear a bow tie, but like Churchill, he always smoked Havannah cigar. He would arrive at the office on time. He used to spend all day in his office room. He was a man of very few words. He was not used to laughing loudly or having fun at 'Indra's durbar.' However, this should not be taken to mean that he was a humourless person. His decisions were indicated through a monosyllabic "yes" or "no". Of all his colleagues, only Sarada seemed to be something of a favourite of his. But he would not call Sarada by his first name until he left the AIR. He called him 'Parsan Nayak'.

Whenever he lost his temper, he would always use the same epithet: Kambakt to express his displeasure. He belonged to Hyderabad, and we were told, he worked in the drama section of the Nizam's broadcasting department. He was of an aristocratic temperament and sometimes recited 'shers' in Urdu. He was warm and affectionate, but as an officer, he stayed aloof from his colleagues. After he retired, I once went to call on him at his residence in Hyderabad. I found him having a hair-cut in a roadside barber's shop in front of his house. I met him there. He got up to receive me although the barber had not finished his job. He was looking very old and feeble. He was delighted to see me, and asked me to go to his house and wait for him there. I apologised for going to meet him when he was in the middle of having a hair-cut. But he placed his hand on my shoulder and said, "Never mind that." Since I was pressed for time, I left soon afterwards, after making a few enquiries about his health. That was our last meeting.

A few days after Asfaque Hussain took over as the Director, AIR, I once presented the drama schedule to him. He

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

listened quietly, puffing at his cigar. I wondered if I was wasting my time with someone who knew nothing about what I was telling him. I suddenly said, "I am told at Hyderabad radio station, you were..."

Sending clouds of smoke into the air, he interrupted me, saying, "Yes, I was a drama producer, too." Nothing followed this. I read out the schedule. "The artists will feel very encouraged if you could kindly visit the studio sometime. Again, you have some experience as a drama producer..."

He relit his cigar and said, "Sure, sure." Then he opened the drawer and looked for something. I got the hint that I should leave. I came out of his room.

Hussain's predecessors, who included Dilip Kumar Sengupta, P.V. Krishnamurty and Girija Kumar Mathur involved themselves directly with the production of programmes. Girija Kumar Mathur's uncle, Jagadish Chandra Mathur, who was an ICS and a famous Hindi writer, had spent some years in Orissa during the early part of his career. He was the author of the famous Hindi play, *Konark.* For these reasons Orissa occupied a very special place in Girija Mathur's affections.

Girija Kumar Mathur was a poet. He also lived and talked like a poet. Whenever he happened to meet a writer, he felt deeply drawn towards him. From time to time, he would call me over to his office, and read out his latest poems to me when no one was around. He was a chain -smoker. While reading out his own poems, he would occasionally read a poem by his wife and ask me, "Which one do you like more?" Later in life, Girija Kumar Mathur earned great fame as a Hindi poet. His collection of poems *Main Bakht Ke Hua Samne* (I stand before Time) won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1991. He also received the prestigious *Vyasa* award. We were very close. Even after he retired, we met quite often in Delhi. Before he joined as Director, AIR, his play *Abhyantara Graha* had been broadcast by AIR, Delhi. He wanted an Oriya adaptation of this science-fiction play to be broadcast by AIR, Cuttack. He himself produced the play, which was translated into Oriya by

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Gopal Chhotray. He worked with us in this studio for hours to get the sound effects for the play recorded.

Given this kind of tradition, the artists felt very excited when they heard that the Director, who was ex-drama producer of the Nizam's broadcasting department, would remain present at the studio during the recording of a play.

A historical play was to be produced shortly. I said to the artists, especially to my colleagues, Girish Nayak, Sachi Das and Bhagaban Das, warning them. "Today the Station Director will be present at the recording. He may himself choose to record it after watching the rehearsal complete with the effects."

On the appointed day, I went up to him and said, "Please come to the studio. Everything is ready."

Asfaque Hussain was smoking his cigar. He said, "I will listen to the recording sitting here. Give me a channel." The recording was over after an hour. I went to his room to find out what he thought of the programme. I asked,"Did you listen to the recording? He said, "Yes." I expected he would tell me something about the quality of the production. But he did nothing. I felt upset. I anxiously asked, "What do you think about the production?"

Mr Hussain said, "The sound of the sword fighting did not come out well." In the play there was a sword fighting sequence. Here, the sound of clashing swords produced by hitting one sword against another inside the studio was added to other recorded sound effects such as the trumpeting and neighing of horses, the sound of conch-shells and trumpets. This formed a background to the dialogues.

As a producer, I was expecting to get his comments on the quality of the acting of the artists, on whether the artists having the right pitch and range of voice had been chosen for different roles, and on whether the music and the effects reflected the mood in the play. And all he had to tell me was that the sound of the sword fighting did not come out well! His response disappointed me. Just in order to end the conversation and take leave of him I said, "We need four swords but

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

we have only one. We have to hit the sword with its sheath to produce the sound of sword fighting. So the sound effect is not convincing."

Now, Asfaque Hussain demanded, "Why one sword? Why didn't you purchase another?"

On account of an inadvertent error this sword had been included as a musical instrument in the government list of properties of AIR. So the sword was kept in the store of musical instruments. Purchases for this store were made by the music section. Whenever I asked the music section to buy another sword, my request was rejected by the head clerk of AIR on the ground that the auditor would object to the music section purchasing a sword. The head clerk would further point out that the radio station did not have the authority to alter the list prepared by the government. I explained to Mr Hussain that we could not procure another sword on account of this objection. He immediately sent for the head clerk, Mr Dasgupta. He asked Mr Dasgupta, "Why don't you buy a sword?" The head clerk said, "The auditors object." Mr. Hussain shouted, "Kambakt, Go and buy two swords today."

I came out of the Director's room and said to Girish, "If the Station Director had not listened to the recording of the play, the drama section would never have got two swords." In fact, that very day, two swords were purchased from a shop in Balu bazar.

Although Asfaque Hussain never stirred out of his room, he had the art of getting things done sitting there.

One day, I was sent for on account of some urgent work at the AIR. That day I came a little late to the station. On reaching the office I was told that the Station Director had sent messengers twice or thrice to find out if I had come. Someone had even been sent to my residence to call me over. I could not figure out what the emergency could possibly have been. I hurried to the Director's room. As usual, 'Indra's durbar' was already in session there, at 10.30 AM. When he saw me, Asfaque Hussain said, "Hum." Then he turned to the officers of the AIR sitting there and said, "Finish the job quickly."

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

The meeting came to an end. The officers were leaving. Asfaque Hussain said to me, "You stay." I could not guess the reason and grew a little anxious. What might be the secret he did not want reveal before others? After all others left the room, Hussain opened the drawer. He brought out a piece of paper and asked me to read it. It was a coded confidential message from the Director General of All India Radio to the Station Director. He deciphered the message. I had been asked to proceed to Manna Transit Camp in Madhya Pradesh to record the tales of woe of the refugees from East Pakistan. There was a communal riot in the eastern province of Pakistan in 1964, as a result of which thousands of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Parsees and others left their homes and came to India. They were put up in the transit camp in Manna before they would be sent to refugee camps elsewhere. I was to record the harrowing experiences of these minorities, which would be made available to other countries through our embassies. That was why the matter had been kept strictly confidential.

Asfaque Hussain did not even let me think over it. His order was absolutely clear: "Proceed at once. Tell me who you want should accompany you. Don't delay."

I left his room. A little later, his peon came and asked me to give the list of the names of people who would accompany me. I gave him the list. The order came out promptly. Sibu Sarkar and Ramchandran were to go with me. Sibu Sarkar, a Bengali, could communicate with the refugees, all of whom were Bengali-speaking. Ramchandran, who was an engineer, could handle the tape-recorder. We were about to leave when Hussain came in and said, "Be quick. Try to reach there by this evening. Set to work from tomorrow morning."

We had not yet had our lunch. We needed a little time to prepare ourselves for the journey. We also needed to find out the location of the place. Manna was near Raipur, on the Sambalpur-Raipur road. It was about five hundred kilometers from Cuttack. It would not take less than eight hours by car. However, we had no option but to set off immediately.

We reached Maneswar late at night. Maneswar was close

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

to Sambalpur, where AIR's new transmitter had been set up. It was extremely hot. Since we were tired and exhausted, sleep over came us in no time.

Raipur was about two hundred thirteen kilometers from Sambalpur, and the transit camp at Manna about two hundred. After a night's rest, the morning was quite enjoyable. We started from Maneswar. As we drove along the road, we indulged in small talk. Green mangoes hung from the trees, which lined the road on either side. A few ripe mangoes dropped from the trees.

Two months before our trip to Manna, I had been to Dandakaranya to make a few features on the refugees there. I visited almost all the places in the Project area. Saibal Gupta, former Chief Secretary of West Bengal, was the Chairman of the Dandakaranya Development Authority with its headquarters at Koraput. Gupta was happy about the feature I was going to make. He had made all necessary arrangements for me. I had a jeep at my disposal, and Subhas Basu, the Public Relations Officer, assisted me. It was he who showed us around. Bhagaban Mohanty, AIR, Cuttack assisted me with the recording.

We proceeded towards Raipur. Behind us, the sun was rising. The mercury level kept rising, too. My mind was full of my experiences at Dandakaranya. A hill, the trees, a stream —all these flashed before my eyes. It was February. One could sense the arrival of spring-time in the forest.

Elaborate arrangements had been made to settle the refugees at Dandakaranya. Small colonies were set up. The forest cleared and land given to refugees. Small industries were established. We had visited all parts of the project areas. After a hard but interesting day's work, we used to spend the nights in some forest bungalow or shed. It was while staying at these bungalows that I came under the spell solitude. Perhaps, the experience sank into my subconscious and resurfaced in my play *Aranya Fasal* (The Wild Harvest). A bridge was built over river Bhaskel, and, for the benefit of the refugees settled there, an irrigation project was also initiated in the dense forests at

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Umerkote. One engineer of Indian origin, who was born and educated in France, had set up a makeshift laboratory there and was testing the soil of the river-bed. The play, *Abartan* was born out of the experience of watching a dam coming up in the heart of the forest.

The past came back to my mind like floating clouds as we drove. Since we were going to a refugee camp in Manna, it was but natural that I should recall the days I had spent in Dandakaranya. Sibu asked me, "What are you thinking about, Babu bhai?"

I said, "Do you know, Sibu, this February, I and Bhagaban went to Danadakaranya to make a feature on refugees from East Pakistan. We had seen ghosts there... ghosts."

Sibu said, "Do you really believe in ghosts?"

I said, "You may believe in them or you may not. First let me tell you about how the fear of ghosts made us spend a sleepless night."

"Those days, Koraput was not as crowded as it is now. There weren't many buildings. It was a quiet place. The shops closed down their shutters after dark. One evening, we came to Koraput, as had been arranged earlier. Subhas Basu, the PRO of the project, was worried when he saw us. The young Basu, who had graduated from the University recently and came here, wondered how he could arrange dinner for us. We said, forget about giving us a proper dinner. We are so hungry, we can make do with whatever is available in the shops. He had made arrangements for our stay in the Officers' Hostel. When the officers came to Koraput in connection with the project work, they put up at that hostel. A long two-storeyed building having twenty to twenty five rooms served as a guest house. Some offices functioned on the ground floor. The rooms remained unoccupied most of the time. There was no verandah on the front, but every room had a box-type balcony without a roof over it. The rooms also opened to at the rar verandah, which was about 150 feet long. The staircase lay at the back and one had to come to the rooms on the first floor this side.

A room at the far end of the verandah, had been booked

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

for us. Subhas babu and his peon showed us our room. Our driver slept in our vehicle, which was parked in the premises of Subhas babu's quarters. When we climbed the stairs, we asked, "No one stays here at the moment?" The PRO replied, "Since the month of March draws closer, everyone must be busy meeting their targets. Who has the time to come to the headquarters now? The hostel is almost empty." He thought we might be afraid of staying there all by ourselves. He smiled and said, assuring us, "The Gurkha durwan lives in a room near the gate and keeps a watch over the hostel. If you need anything, you can call him from your balcony."

Before coming to the hostel, we took tea and snacks in the PRO's quarters. He told us a few things about Koraput. In the days of British rule, the agents of the tea estates of Assam used to come to the interior pockets of the agency areas to arrange coolies. First, they used to bring the coolies to Koraput and from here the coolies were taken to other places. If someone complained against the deceit of the agents, he was beaten to death. The bodies of such coolies were buried under a mango tree, which grew near the graveyard of the sahibs. I said, "Where is the mango tree?" Subhas babu replied, "It's here." It stood very close to the hostel building; one could easily see it from the rear verandah.

The PRO and his peon left. We closed the door of our room, switched off the light and went to bed. I was very tired and in no time fell into a deep sleep. A little later, I heard a sound and woke up. I felt as if someone was banging at the skylight. I called Bhagaban. May be he was still awake. When I asked him if he heard anything, he said that he heard someone knocking loudly at the door.

We switched on the light and came to the balcony. We watched the sleeping town from there. There were a few street lights. In the thin mist of late spring, the town seemed mysterious. We called the durwan; but there was no one around. He must have been lying somewhere, dead drunk. Then we opened the door to the rear verandah, which was lit by two weak electric bulbs, and looked from one end to the other. It

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was absolutely empty. We closed both the doors and came back to our beds. But this time we did not switch off the lights in the room. We pretended to sleep. Soon afterwards, the same sound came, now from the skylight, now from the window or the door. At times, the sound was loud and we felt as if the doors of the window shook. We talked to each other and wondered if it was the work of one or more than one ghost. We felt terribly scared. We brought our two beds closer. Bhagaban whispered to me. "Look at the skylight, a face is peeping through it." I looked and noticed a shadow receding from there. In order to give him courage, I said, "Don't be afraid, Bhagaban." Bhagaban said, "The room is lit. No ghost can do us any harm."

The sound returned at intervals. The night grew older. The sound also grew louder. The doors shook as if there was an earthquake. Bhagaban felt my forehead and saw that I was running a temperature. I said that it was due to tension and that there was nothing to worry about. By that time, we had grown accustomed to the sound and the shaking of the doors. We talked loudly to each other. Bhagaban said, "The ghost is really a dangerous one. Tell me, whose ghost it might be." "People had been killed and buried under that mango tree. There is the graveyard of the Christian sahibs," I told him.

We concluded that the spirits of people with unfulfilled desires came and scared us. Both of us tried to say words of courage to each other. We pricked our ears in order to hear more such sounds. Suddenly, an idea crossed my mind. I said, "See Bhagaban, the ghosts will disappear in a minute." He was surprised and asked me, "But, how?" I remembered if one recited lines from the *Gita*, ghosts would disappear at once. I simply said, "See how they will go away."

I had formed the habit of carrying the pocket edition of the *Gita* with me wherever I went and reciting lines even when I did not understand their meaning. I started reciting the lines. Bhagaban listened to me. But the sound did not stop. Bhagaban remarked. "Did I not tell you, it's a dangerous ghost." I said, "But he can do us no harm. The room is lighted, and a copy of

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the *Gita* lies under the pillow."

The small pocket edition had restored our self-confidence. We felt emboldened. In spite of repeated occurrence of the sound, we spoke normally. I said, "What about writing about the experiences of this night?" I brought out a post card and wrote a letter to Nayan Kishore Mohanty, the Programme Executive of the Drama Section. I narrated our experience and concluded the letter with these words: "It's midnight. Can't say what'll happen hereafter. If we escape the ghost tonight I shall post this letter to you in the morning and shall narrate the incident when we meet. If something happens to us this letter will explain everything to you."

The intensity and frequency of the sound decreased in the small hours of the night. Our fear had also lessened. Soon, day broke. The bugle woke up the policemen. We left our beds and went to brush our teeth. We went to the PRO's quarters and narrated our experiences to him. I carried the postcard with me and dropped it in the letterbox at the gate. The PRO was a bit surprised to see us so early in the morning. After hearing our story, he said, "Yes, many such things are heard about the hostel."

We now approached the refugee camp at Manna. All four of them—Sibu, Ramchandran, the driver and the peon, listened to my story with rapt attention. Ramchandran said in broken Oriya that he had heard many such ghost stories in his childhood. "But this is your own experience. Quite interesting really !" I said, "Let me me finish the story."

The remaining portion of the story ran like this: "We left Koraput quite early in the morning. We visited several camps in the day and reached the inspection bungalow at Umerkote in the evening. As our car entered the premises, we noticed a jeep coming out. The man sitting in the jeep was none else than the eminent Oriya novelist, Kahnu Charan Mohanty. He was the younger brother of my brother-in-law, Jadunath Mohanty, who had married my cousin, Kamini. Kahnu bhai was the land acquisition officer of Government of Orissa. He was in charge of acquisition of land and the consequent

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

rehabilitation of the displaced families. So he had to tour the whole of Dandakaranya. He was surprised when he saw me there.

"How come you're here?"

"I shall stay the night here. I am making a feature on Dandakaranya for the AIR. I thought of you only yesterday. See, how lucky I am!" Kahnu bhai ordered his driver to turn the jeep back. He had made up his mind to spend the night there. I was pleasantly surprised to happen upon Kahnu bhai after a long time.

We kept on talking late into the night. I told him of my experience at the hostel the previous night. He narrated to me another ghost story. He said, "I've heard several such stories. I've spent many nights alone in the rest sheds in dense forests and been a witness to many such incidents. The chowkidars of the bungalows have also told me many stories. Haven't you read my ghost stories?"

Kahnu bhai narrated ghost stories he himself had written. The chowkidar reminded us that it was dinner time. Kahnu bhai held definite views about ghosts; but his opinion varied from case to case. I requested him to investigate the case of the ghost, which troubled us the previous night. He said, "Let's see."

Our car was speeding ahead. The mercury was rising. The Maha Bisuva Sankranti was only a few days away. Sibu was curious about the ghost. He said, "Did Kahnu babu enquire into the matter? Did he tell you anything about it later?"

"No, not yet. Being what he is, he will certainly tell me about it one day," I replied.

At last we arrived at Manna. On our right, a camp had been set up on hundreds of acres of barren land. As our car turned in the direction of the camp, we noticed the make-shift tents which housed the refugees. A few houses had asbestos or tin roofs.

The car came to a stop. I asked a government official. "Who is in charge of the camp? Where is his office?" Probably he thought that we might not be able to find him on our own.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

So he accompanied us to where the officer stayed. We reached a house with a vast empty space in front. Saying, "Sir, this is the office-cum-residence of our sahib," he left us. Sibu and I went up to the verandah and knocked at the door. A servant came out and asked us to wait. The sahib, after finishing his lunch, came to see us.

The sahib was none other than Saibal Gupta, the former Chief Secretary of West Bengal. I did not know that Gupta was staying in this hut, among the refugees. I was glad to see him in Manna. As the Chairman of Dandakaranya Project Authority, he had seen to our comforts. I recalled how he had said a few kind words on the feature we had made. I thought that the peon must have told him of the purpose of our visit. I told him formally of our objective: "We've come from AIR, Cuttack to record the experiences of riot-affected refugees." Gupta exploded, "What are you going to record?" I was not prepared to face a situation like this. I grew nervous. I explained, "We have been asked to get one hundred refugees to talk about the ordeal they have been through and record their stories. These recordings will be sent to different countries through our embassies. The international community will then know how these people had been harassed and tortured over there."

Gupta became furious. He trembled with rage, and said, "What is there for them to know? Don't they already know what happens there? Don't they know why thousands pour into this country every day? Who cares for these millions? Who bothers about what they eat? Do they get drinking water? Bad luck ! Bad luck for Bengalis. They have been tortured. No, I can't help you at all." I chose to keep quiet after this volcanic eruption. The situation was slowly becoming unmanageable.

Soon, however, Gupta's anger subsided. We kept standing on the verandah. He told us, "You have travelled a long distance. Go and see for yourself how these live here. Can anything worse happen to Bengalis?"

Under these harrowing circumstances I dared not remind him that they were Bengalis all right, but they were also former

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Indian citizens. Still Gupta's reactions were not unjustified. They were only natural. The tales of woe the refugees narrated and the wretched life they lived would melt even rocks. Gupta was a human being, after all.

I handed him a copy of the directive I had received and said, "It was not possible to inform you earlier, Sir." He read it. His anger evaporated. We were still standing. He now asked us to take our seats. He himself sat down on a chair and said, "Perhaps you haven't taken your lunch." We said nothing. Then he called someone from the house and said, "These gentlemen have come from All India Radio. They have come all the way from Cuttack. Give them some cold drink." Then we planned our recording programme.

The camp at Manna was only a transit camp. The refugees from East Pakistan were first brought here and were later resettled in other states. About 1.5 lakh people were still waiting to be rehabilitated: It was extremely difficult on our part to select a hundred persons and record their tales, since all of them were victims of the riot and had undergone terrible experiences.

Gupta said, "It won't be possible on your part to stay at Manna. You had better proceed to Raipur, where you can find a hotel to stay in. You have a car. You can commute every day. A tent would be put up for you by ten in the morning, tomorrow. Electricity would be supplied to enable you to get your recording done. Two officers would be there to see to arrangements. They would bring people to the tent. There would be a couple of chairs, a bench, a table, a pitcher full of water and a few glasses in the tent. But you have to go to Raipur for your meals. You can bring packet lunches with you, if you like." All arrangements were soon made. After all, Gupta was an efficient administrator. He was a committed person. Otherwise, he would not have stayed in a tin-roofed two-room house under the hot April sun.

Smt Gupta came out, followed by a servant holding a tray with glasses of cold drink on it. She handed those glasses to us and said, "We are sorry, we couldn't offer you anything

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

to eat. Please take this lemon sherbet." Gupta said, "Please let me know whenever you face any difficuties. My wife will also help you." Smt Ashoka Gupta was well-known in West Bengal for her dedicated social service. She was the daughter of the eminent Bengali writer, Jyotirmayee Devi.

We took leave of the couple and drove down to Raipur. We were very tired and hungry.

Next morning, we started recording the heart-rending experiences of the refugees. A tent had been put up, and the officers brought a few refugees to us. The victims of the riot belonged to several communities: Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Parsees and Christians. They spoke in Bengali with a heavy Urdu accent. People belonging to different areas spoke different dialects. Although we knew Bengali, at times we found it difficult to communicate with some of them. Even Sibu, whose mother tongue was Bengali, found it difficult to follow what they said.

The refugees spoke chiefly about why they had to leave their native place, and gave us details of how they were tortured. They crossed the river that separates the two countries at the check post at Banpol to reach Banagaon. Almost all the them said the same thing: "They did not want us to live there."

Their main allegation was that the Government remained silent when their houses were burnt down there and properties were looted; on the other hand, the perpetrators felt encouraged by the silence of the Government.

We continued to record the harrowing experiences of refugees for three consecutive days. Words failed to describe what they had gone through at the hands of their torturers. A few of them broke down and wept. An old woman said that her son's body was cut into pieces before her very eyes. A young woman told us how her husband was flung into the fire. When she protested, one of her breasts was cut off. We wanted to record the experiences of a woman who had been raped. It was difficult to persuade a woman who would be willing to talk about such a shocking ordeal. We sought the help of Smt. Ashoka Gupta. She found one such woman, who let us record her painful experiences.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

A young woman with a baby in her arms, told a different sort of story. She heard a group of miscreants entering her neighbour's house. Her husband, who was outside, came into the house and they bolted the door from the inside. The miscreants forced the door open, and pulled her husband out. She hid behind a heap of hay and came out after nightfall. She saw this baby in her neighbour's house, lying among dead bodies. She took the baby in her arms and came to Hasina, her close friend. She used to wish 'Id Mubarak' to her every year. Hasina, in her turn, used to pay a visit to her on the occasion of the Durga Puja.

When she reached Hasina's house, the latter was alone. Her husband had gone to a relative's house. She was fully aware of the riot going on. She was afraid that her husband might not like the presence of a Hindu woman in their house. In order to escape the wrath of the rioters, he might wish to kill this *kafir*. However, Hasina comforted her saying, "Don't worry, I shall save your life at any cost."

They decided that she and the baby must cross the river and go to India. The boatmen used to earn a lot by ferrying these refugees across the river. Hasina accompanied her to the bank and it was day-break by the time they got there. The poor fugitive offered all her ornaments to the boatman, who was willing to help her leave East Pakistan. She bade her friend good bye and got on the boat. The friend waved her in silence. May be, she wanted to say 'Albida' to her. She had risked her life to save her friends. After a while, when her boat reached the middle of the river, she noticed a few men accosting her friend. She could recognise them, even from the distance. They belonged to Hasina's community. She saw those men manhandling her friend. She did not know if they killed Hasina for helping her get away.

The baby girl whom Hasina's friend brought to India with her became Rita, the main character in my play, *Sabdalipi*. The play, which I wrote in 1975 had been directed by the renowned stage director, Radhakrushna Mohapatra, and was staged in Puri. A Hindi translation of it was staged by the International

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Theatre, Bhubaneswar in 1977. Gobind Gupta, the founder of the theatre group, directed the play. The Oriya play had been translated into Hindi by Smt Bijaya Gupta, who played the role of Rita. Both Mr and Mrs Gupta were the alumni of the National School of Drama, Delhi. The other artists who acted in the play included Dhirendra Mallick, Bidhunath Raul, Mihir Meher, Santanu Kar, Pratap Samal and Narayan Pati. Many of them continued to be associated with Oriya and Hindi theatre. Dhirendra Mallik revived an institution called 'Satabdira Kalakar' in Bhubaneswar and established himself as a stage director. Narayan Pati earned a name for his work in Hindi theatre, and television. Mihir Meher joined Doordarshan.

The Bengali version of *Sabdalipi* was staged in Calcutta. On every Sunday for several months in the middle of 1984 the play was staged at the Theatre Centre. The winner of the Central Sangeeta Natak Akademi and the head of the drama deapartment of Rabindra Bharati University, Tarun Ray was associated with the centre. The play was directed by an upcoming stage director, Pranab Bhattacharya; Swapna Chatterji played the role of Rita.

Whenever I witnessed a performance of the play, corrected the proof of a new edition of it or glanced through its English translation, my mind went back to the refugee camp at Manna. We returned to Cuttack after spending three days there. What the refugees told us had left us deeply disturbed. Sibu had been visibly upset; he kept quiet for several days. It took several days before he felt normal.

Back in Cuttack, I met Asfaque Hussain, the Director of AIR, and requested him to listen to the recordings. I wanted his opinion regarding the quality of recording. He said, "That won't be necessary. Please send the original recordings to Delhi immediately."

A few months after I returned from the camp at Manna, I came upon Kahnu bhai at a book shop in Binod Bihari. Most writers used to visit this area, where all the leading Oriya publishers had their establishments. Kahnu bhai sat on a bench near the counter of Friends' Publishers. I sat down near him

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

and asked him if he found out more about the ghosts in the hostel in Koraput. In the mean time, he had made a thorough inquiry into the matter. He was not a superstitious man. He always went to the root of everything. He said to me, "Yes, I forgot to write to you. I have found out who the ghost was. Do you know, one day I went there and spent a night in the same room. In the night the ghost banged at the window."

I felt curious. Kahnu bhai continued, "New railway tracks were being laid in Koraput those days. The contractors used dynamite to blast the rocks. The vibration of the explosion could be felt in Dandakaranya hostel in Koraput. The windows, doors and skylights on the first floor shook at its impact." I recalled, the contractors had been permitted to use dynamite only at night. Kahnu bhai's investigation solved the mystery. I am not sure if ghosts really exist, but certainly we had mistaken the vibrations of the dynamite explosions for the work of ghosts in our room at Dandakaranya hostel.

I had visited Rourkela after the steel plant had been set up there. When I saw the blast furnace, I had a feeling that the area would soon become prosperous, like the Ruhr area of Germany. I had also visited Hirakud. I stood near a turbine in a closed tunnel which was located below the water level. Since the turbine was being repaired, it was not possible to go near it.

I had visited Paradip several times, before, during and after the construction of the port, to make documentary features on it. The possibility of constructing a port by digging the mouth of Mahanadi was then being explored. I had accompanied Haribandhu Mohanty, the Director of Industries, who went to explain the matter to the Japanese team. Mohanty stood at the Choumuhani lock, the last lock on Taladanda canal, where the canal meets river Mahanadi. Thoughts of the glorious days of Orissa's maritime trade came to my mind.

I traveled all over Orissa in course of my career at AIR. I had visited Balimela at a time when only a fourth of the dam had been constructed there. I made the recordings, sitting in the driver's cabin of a huge excavator used for digging rock.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Dumpers were used to remove the stones. I had also spent two days in the colony of Tibetan refugees at Chandragiri. They had left behind all their belongings in Tibet. Only their self-confidence kept them getting on. In their tin-roof sheds, they kept themselves busy making carpets. Their strong will-power helped them survive. They made good money selling those carpets in different parts of the country.

One day I went to Sonepur, with Kahnu bhai and Bichitrananda Kar, the editor of *Matrubhumi*, to attend a literary meet. On our way, we stayed in a bungalow at Boudh, which was situated on the banks of the Mahanadi. Large *bhakur* fish were plentiful in the spaces between boulders on the riverbed. The prawns of Sonepur were also very large-sized. We were served plateful of fried prawns for breakfast on the day following the meeting. Like the lobsters of Paradip, the length of these prawns varied from 5 to 9 inches.

In October 1971, I went to Kalahandi as the chief guest of the annual function of Braja Mohan Sahitya Samaj. The chief patron of the literary organisation was Pratap Keshari Deo, the Maharaja of Kalahandi. The organisation had been named after his father. A veteran politician, Deo was the President of the Swatantra Party and an M.P. those days. All arrangements of the meeting had been personally supervised by the Maharaj himself. Arrangements for my stay had been made in the Palace Guest House. It was here that I learnt what it meant to be the guest of a king. Although the king had ceased to rule, a regal ambience still prevailed there.

I liked Bhawanipatna. The dramatist, Prafulla Rath hailed from this place. He had a good command over Hindi and he could translate into Hindi. We discussed the situation of contemporary Oriya theatre. My play, *Amrutasya Putrah,* had been produced by the Srujani group in August. Newspapers had carried detailed reports on the play and on the performance. Critics had categorised the plays I wrote in those days under the label 'Nabanatya'. In *Amrutasya Putrah,* I had experimented with the folk form for the first time.

The 'Srujani' group, which we had formed in 1964,

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spearheaded the 'Nabanatya' movement. By the year, 1971, the group earned immense popularity in Orissa. The sale proceeds of the play, *Amrutasya Putrah* touched Rs.400/-, while those of a commercial play were a mere Rs.30/- or Rs.40/-. We felt really encouraged.

The plays performed by amateur theatre groups such as Srujani, Sanket and Friends' Union were labelled by critics as 'Nabanatya', contemporary or modern plays. A few of the plays were called 'absurd' plays. Personally, I don't believe in this sort of labelling. When the question was raised if *Aranya Fasal* (Wild Harvest) was an absurd play, my reply was: "It does not matter how a play is classified. It is important whether people accept the play and stage it." I believe that a play should urge the audience to think, while at the same time entertaining them. Writing a play was something of a quest; in *Amrutasya Putrah* I attempted to employ the folk form while dealing with an unconventional plot based on contemporary reality. I felt encouraged in my quest for new theatre by reading the works of Baishnab Pani, the unrivalled poet of the masses. The poetic performances of Pani's works attracted large crowds and his works showed a perfect fusion of folk and literary forms. It is possible that he employed the concept of 'total theatre' for providing entertainment to the masses.

Pani's opera found its legitimate place in the All India Radio in 1960, four years after his death. Instructions were sent by the Director General of the AIR to all radio centres to send the recordings of operas in regional languages to Delhi. Gopal Chhotray, who had been working for the AIR as a script writer since 1956, took the responsibility of selecting an opera and preparing its radio script. Needless to say, Baishnab Pani's *Rangasabha* was selected for the purpose.

Rangasabha was broadcast on the 28th of Novemeber 1960. It was produced by a talented producer, Bhubaneswar Mishra, who had been assisted by Jogendra Mishra, a member of Pani's team. Singers who lent their voice included Balakrushna Dash, Akshay Mohanty, Sikandar Alam, Binod Bihari Srichandran, Bina Devi, Padmalaya Gorabadu, Santilata Rath and

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Shyamamani Devi. The renowned guru, Kelu Charan Mohapatra played *dholak*. The programme was a grand success. Its immense popularity was evident from the large number of appreciative letters received by the AIR.

When *Rangasabha* was broadcast, I was working in the News section. In 1961, I joined the Drama section as producer. Here I came to be involved in the production of operas. Although Baishnab Pani's operas were broadcast often, gradually the works of popular opera-writers like Balakrishna Mohanty and others also came to be broadcast. Most of these operas were adapted for radio by Gopal Chhotray. He edited out portions which seemed redundant. We had to see to it that the broadcasting time of an opera did not exceed one hour. The operas were produced jointly by the drama director and the music director.

The broadcasting of *Rangasabha* in 1960 had given a new lease of life to Oriya opera, and by 1969, it had come to enjoy unprecedented popularity. But, no modern playwright had authored a single opera based on Baisnab Pani's model. In 1969, the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi fell in the month of September. Long before the festival, someone suggested at 'Indra's durbar' in AIR that a new programme should be broadcast on the occasion of the Ganesh Puja. Everyone turned to look at me. I proposed that a new opera would be broadcast on the day of this festival, and Gopal Chhotray would write it. A new opera ! The idea excited those present at the durbar. The proposal was enthusiastically approved by everyone. At the time, the Director, AIR was Abani Kumar Das. He was an Assamese, and he had joined only two months before. He was glad that an innovative new programme would be broadcast so soon after his arrival. He readily gave the proposal the seal of approval.

After the durbar was over, I came back to the Drama section. At that time, all of us working in the section used to sit in one big room. As a matter of habit, I always gave a brief summary of the deliberations at the 'durbar' to everyone in the section, especially to Gopal babu. So I walked up to him and

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said, "This year we'll broadcast a new opera on the occasion of Ganesh Chaturthi." Gopal babu was taken aback. A new opera ! I added, smiling, "And you will write it." At first Gopal babu thought I was joking. But when he realised that I was in earnest, he was stunned. Writing an original new opera was simply unthinkable at the time. He expressed his inability and his unwillingness to write it. But I was insistent. He was put off by my decision that he must write an opera. We got into heated argument over this. Our friends watched us, puzzled, for this was the first time they saw us arguing like this. Gopal babu felt as if I was imposing a decision on him. For my part, I thought that since new operas modelled on the old would surely come to be written sooner or later, Gopal babu should take the credit of being the pioneer in the field. This was the same argument I had advanced at an important dinner meeting organised by friends associated with Srujani. Our discussion came to an end when I took out the drama schedule form, and entered the following in the space below the heading '15 September': *Ganesh Opera* (duration 60 minutes), writer: Gopal Chhotray, time: 9.30 PM. This incensed Gopal babu. This seemed an attack on his freedom as a writer. But I remained firm in my decision that he must write an opera.

Gopal babu sulked for a few days. I also kept wondering if I did the right thing. This was the first and last time in our life when we had such a sharp difference of opinion. But the period of tension did not last long. Our relationship soon became cordial. Gopal babu wrote an opera titled *Sri Ganesh* and it was broadcast on the day of Ganesh puja. Now all the unhappiness melted away. Gopal babu was delighted to no end by the praise that was lavished on his opera from all quarters.

This incident had a nice ending, too. Three years after the *Ganesh* opera was broadcast, Gopal babu brought out a collection of operas. It bore the title, *Three Operas*, and was published by Grantha Mandir. The first of the three was *Sri Ganesh*, which he had written under the pressure I had exerted on him. In the acknowldgement, he wrote: There is nothing unusual about a writer receiving encouragement from

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others. If anyone had asked me to write these operas, I would have politely declined. But the encouragement I received from my friend Manoranjan Das for writing these can be described in one word: pestering. He insisted that I must write a new opera. I did so. Writing these has given me immense pleasure, and I am extremely grateful to Sri Das for this."

Later, when I recalled this incident, I wondered if new and original operas in Oriya would have come into being without my having pestered Gopal babu to write one, but the idea that elements of folk theatre could be used to enrich modern Oriya drama goaded me into incorporating these into my own plays.

The time was also a propitious one. Winds of change were beginning to blow through the world of Indian theatre. Everyone seemed to wonder if India had its own theatrical traditions. If it did, what were its special features? How was it different ? These questions led to lively debates all over the country. By this time I had reached the mid-point of my career as a playwright. At this time, I compulsively looked for ways of writing a new kind of play. My search had led me through *Yauban* (1944) to *Aranya Fasal* (1969). The spectacular success of operas broadcast by AIR now opened up new possiblities for me. Just around this time, a national debate on the relationship between folk theatre and modern drama came to be held.

This debate was organised in 19-20 February, 1971 in Delhi under the auspices of Sangeet Natak Akademi. At the time the Secretary of the Akademi was Dr Suresh Awasti. The discussion centred on the contemporary relevance of traditional theatre.

I took part in this debate. The other participants were Utpal Dutt, Dina Gandhi, Shanta Gandhi, Jagadish Chandra Mathur, E. Alkaji, Suresh Awasti, P.L. Despande, Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Shila Bhatia, Bijay Tendulkar, Satyadev Dubey, G.S. Pillai, Ramesh Chandra, Kapila Vatsayan, Balwant Gargi, N.C. Jain and B.V. Karanth. They discussed the traditional theatre of India from several

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points of view. I, for my part, focused on *yatra* or opera in Orissa. One thing became clear to me after the discussion. It was not that plays based on the principles of western drama would lack artistic power or excellence or would fail to appeal to the audience, but one should not be blind to the possibility of enriching modern drama through the use of elements derived from our traditional theatre. In fact, the incorporation of elements of traditional theatre into modern plays would win a larger audience and enhance their appeal. We could then build a towering edifice on the foundation laid by our forefathers. In the fullness of time, plays animated by this idea would deserve to be termed truly Indian theatre.

After I came back from Delhi I felt as if my search for a new kind of drama was at last leading somewhere. I wondered if I should translate the theory into actual dramatic practice.

By this time, preparations were on for putting on stage *Amrutasya Putrah*, the third play I had written for Srujani. As an experiment, I introduced a few opera songs into the speeches of the play's protagonist, Sanatan. I apprehensively waited to find out if the members of the audience looked upon it as a gimmick or if they accepted it as an integral part of the play. When the play was staged in August 1971, all my apprehensions were laid to rest. The applause from the audience dispelled all my doubts. Later, theatre critics, too, lauded my experiment.

After this, I employed the folk form with greater vigour in my play *Katha Ghoda*. This was enacted in Puri in 1972 in an open-air stage and was watched by a large number of people coming from all social classes.

With the passage of time, my ways of employing folk forms in my plays also underwent change. In time, I found an opportunity to use the theatre idiom inherent in traditional drama in modern plays. The result of this experiment was my play *Nandika Keshari*. For writing this play, I did not rely on any single folk form; I tried to combine in it the ingredients and idioms of several folk forms. However, as far as the

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structural organisation of the play was concerned, it was based to a large extent on a folk form called *Desiya Nata*. My experiment with folk forms now embraced opera, *yatra, suanga* (farces), musicals, Odissi music, riddles, and proverbs. In the beginning, I did not use folk theatre. After writing a few plays using elements of folk theatre, I realised that in our search for a theatre that would transcend time, folk theatre was no resting point; it represented only one of the stages of the evolution of dramatic art.

Once (in 1971), when I delivered a talk at a meeting organised by Brajamohan Sahitya Sansad at Bhawanipatna, I referred to my use of folk forms in my play *Amrutusya Putrah*. The topic of my lecture was 'The Quest for a New Theatre'. Among those present at the meeting were the Maharaja of Kalahandi, and several writers and intellectuals of Bhawanipatna.

The meeting came to an end. But no one seemed to bother about making arrangements about my return trip to Cuttack. Whenever I made enquiries, I was told that I should not worry about it. I was beginning to feel restless as I waited in the guest room in Maharaja's palace. After two days' wait I said, "I want to meet the Maharaja." I met him at his parlour that day in the afternoon. We talked about several things, but the Maharaja made no mention of my return trip. When I took leave of him, I asked, "When am I leaving?" He smiled and said, "The day after tomorrow." I wondered why I should not leave the next day. The delay seemed inexplicable.

The next day, while I was having dinner, someone from the palace came in and said, "The Maharaja wants you to be ready at 9 AM tomorrow."

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know, Sir", he said.

The next day, I was ready at nine. I was informed that the Maharaja was waiting for me below. I went downstairs. A jeep was waiting outside. The Maharaja himself had occupied the driver's seat. He motioned towards the front seat and asked me to take it. Then he started the jeep and drove it through the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

town. I could not bring myself to ask him where we were heading. The others occupying the rear seats were also keeping quiet. The jeep left the town behind and gained a lonely laterite track. We drove past small settlements and well-kept, neat tribal huts. Soon, all traces of human habitation vanished. All that now met our eyes were small hills sorrounded by forest trees, which stood on either side of the road. After a little while, our jeep turned into the jungle, and negotiated stony cart tracks. The jungle around us gradually became denser. Everyone inside our jeep had so far kept absolutely quiet. The whole journey was full of suspense. I wondered if we were going to see the hieroglyphic writing in the caves of Gudahandi. After thirty or forty minutes we finally arrived at a clearing lying at the heart of very dense jungle. It was a beautiful spot, which was surrounded on all sides by tall sal trees. On one side flowed a little hill stream among large rocks. This was Phulijharir, a well-known picnic spot in Kalahandi. I found a few gentlemen from Bhawanipatna already waiting for us there, sitting on a durree spread out on the clearing. Cooking had already begun. Mutton was being fried in a large cooking pot. The aroma permeated the air of the cool October afternoon and whetted our appetite.

A get-together and a feast had been organised at Phulijharir at the Maharaj's instance. Here I was given a citation on behalf of the residents of Bhawanipatna. We partook of the feast, sitting on the ground under the sal trees. The simple ceremony and the pure undiluted affection of my friends in Bhawanipatna will always remain fresh in my mind. The Raja of Khariar, Anup Singhdeo was present at the get-together as a special invitee of the Maharaja. At the request of the Maharaja of Kalahandi, he presided over this meeting.

The hydro-electric project set up on the Andhra-Orissa border at once awed and enthralled me with its sublime aspect. Water fell from the high peak of a hill through a tunnel and rotated the turbines down below, generating electricity. To get to the power house one had to go down with the help of a winch. When the winch moved, one felt as if one was

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sliding into the nether world. Small steps had been cut into the side of the hill, which lay a few feet away from the winch. The labourers used these to go up or down. Like a child sitting in a perambulator, I sat in an open cabin and slid down the winch to the Duduma power house. I got a programme recorded there. At Duduma, I stayed at my relative Bhudev Das's residence. In the evening, he came to know that I had gone down to the power house to record a programme. He was shocked. "Why did you go down?" he asked. "I have come to do a recording here. That's why", I said, smiling. He said, "People working in the power house could have been brought over for that purpose." I was surprised. He explained, "I can see that they have not told you everything. A tiger recently snatched away a labourer while he was climbing the steps lying close to the winch." The tiger can easily pounce on someone travelling in the open cabin down the winch.

I had once a very narrow escape from a wild elephant. I was then travelling in a jeep from Gorumahisani in Mayurbhanj to Baripada. It was getting dark. The jeep stopped suddenly at the turning in the gravelly forest road. Our path had been blocked by a huge tusker. He was crossing to the other side of the road. When he saw the jeep, he turmpeted loudly and the jungle shook. He was soon joined by a few smaller elephants. The driver backed the jeep some distance. But looking back, we found that a herd of elephants had cut off our retreat. We were trapped. I asked the driver, dropping my voice to a whisper, "Won't they attack us?" "Who knows? Elephants sometimes take this road. They occasionally attack vehicles and human beings. We have to leave everything to the Lord", he said. We sat still for quite some time. A minute seemed like an hour. The elephants did not do us any harm. After some time, they moved off.

Memories associated with many other places kept recurring: the spot in the fort in Keonjhar where human sacrifices were offered to the goddess; the abandoned, dilapidated house in Fort William where the British used to hang natives during the early part of Company rule.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

It was not that my life as an employee of AIR was always full of pleasant experiences like these. There were unpleasant experiences, too. One sometimes got pricked by thorns while trying to pluck a rose; but the incidents never got me into real trouble. In fact, they ultimately became sources of memories which one could cherish throughout one's life. In the twilight of my life, these return like an unforgettable sequence in a great movie.

Those days AIR had set up advisory committees, which had for their members distinguished scholars from Orissa. Their suggestions for improving the quality of programmes received a lot of importance.

In 1964, Paramananda Acharya, the eminet archaeologist was a member of the AIR advisory committee. He said that in some old Brahmin settlements in Mayurbhanj, there were a few who could recite the *Veda* with the proper intonation. But they were getting old, and the tradition of reciting the *Veda* accurately might disappear after them. It was therefore necessary to get their recitals recorded and preserve them at the AIR. If this was done, it was likely that these might lead one to the hitherto undiscovered *suktas* of the *Veda*.

This proposal excited me as much as the discovery of a new world delighted someone who gazed all night long at the sky through a telescope.

Paramananda babu belonged to Baripada. We requested him to invite brahmins who recited the *Veda* from the villages to Baripada so that we could record their recitals there. It was settled that he would bring the pundits from their villages in bullock-carts, and that we would reach Paramanda babu's residence before 9 AM. and start the recording right away so that the pundits could go home after the recording was over.

I and my colleague, Bhagaban Mohanty travelled to Baripada to record the programme. By the time we reached Paramandanda babu's residence, it was half past twelve. We opened the gate and entered the space between it and the high verandah of his house. An awning made up of coconut fronds had been put up there, and a durree had been spread on the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

ground. On the high verandah sat seven or eight old gentlemen. The caste-marks on their forehead, and the scarves on their shoulders indicated their special status. All these arrangements had been made for the recording of the Veda recital. A crowd had collected to watch the recording. The time for the recording had been set at 9 AM.

Our long delay had upset Paramananda babu terribly. If we had failed to arrive, it would never have been possible to get so many pundits from their villages again for a recording. And Paramananda babu would have lost his face. These thoughts had left him speechless with anger. He paced restlessly under the awning. We paid our respects to him. I tried to explain how we were delayed on our way. But he was in no mood to listen to me. He exploded, before I could even open my mouth, "I have made these pundits come so early in the morning. You are so irresponsible !" Then he directed his anger to the AIR and the Government of India. "No, this recording won't be done. You go back. I'll write to the Government of India." So on and so forth. I stood speechless, like someone accused of a crime. I did not dare say that the Balasore-Baripada road had upset all our calculations. Instead of arriving at 9 AM, we ended up reaching Baripada at 12.30 PM. We had reached Balasore by train and boarded a Baripada bound bus at 7 AM. We had been assured that it would take us an hour and a half or two hours at most to reach Baripada. But, this 'express' bus, into which human beings had been packed like sacks of potatoes, stopped at every village on the way. It also moved at a snail's pace. It even developed mechanical trouble on the way and had to be given a push a number of times. I could not tell Paramananda babu that all buses plying along this route were no better than the one we had taken.

We were buried under a hailstorm of angry abuse. Paramananda babu trembled with rage. But, whatever grows hot quickly tends to cool very fast. After a little while, he became quiet. Maybe, he had nothing more to say. He went and settled into a chair. In the mean time, Bhagawan had fixed the microphone to the recording machine. The storm seemed to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

have blown over. At last, the recording began. One after another, the pundits recited the *Veda*. The sound of the Vedic hymns resonated in the air.

The cassettes were stored in the archives of the AIR, for the use of researchers in future. Later, copies of these were sent to Delhi, where these would be stored permanently in the AIR directorate. We hoped that these would shed new light on the right way to recite the *Veda* and lead to the discovery of the undiscovered part of the *Veda*. I do not know if this did happen or not. But our recordings are stored in the AIR archives for future reference.

It was late afternoon by the time the recording came to an end. We were feeling terribly hungry now. The determination to finish recording had made us forget all about hunger. Paramananda babu had organised a lunch for all present. We sat under the awning. Food was served on leaves. Paramananda babu sat by my side. He had not taken his food until then. While we ate, he enquired, "Why were you late?" I explained the difficulties we had gone through, and said that we were unlucky. He listened to everything I said and kept quiet.

It was getting dark. The pundits returned to their villages. We got ready to make our return trip to Cuttack. Paramananda babu came out of the house and stood beside me. He placed his hand on my shoulder, and said, "Did you feel hurt?" I looked up at his face. His eyes lit up by the mellow light of late afternoon, seemed as if they expected a reply. They no longer burnt with anger as they had done at midday, and were now brimming with love and affection. These few words dispelled the shadow of these unpleasant moments from my heart. It seemed as if nothing painful had happened. His anger and abnormal behaviour were nothing but an expression of his passionate sincerity and commitment.

I humbly said, "Sir, you did not scold us out of anger, but out of great affection. I feel myself blessed for having received a scolding from you." At my reply his eyes filled. We took the evening bus and came back to Cuttack. On the way, I thought,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

"What a great opportunity we would have missed if the pundits had gone home because of our delay!"

A few years ago I read a biography of Nehru written by his younger sister, Krishna Hathee Singh. It furnishes a beautiful example of how great men sometimes act under strong impulses.

Once Nehru was on his way from Teen Murti Bhavan to the Red Fort to hoist the national tricolour on the occasion of the Independence Day. The car he sat in speedily followed the pilot car. Suddenly, his car deviated from the approved route and took to another road. Nehru asked his private secretary, who was in the car, why his route was changed. The private secretary replied, nervously, "The route was changed yesterday at night on the advice of the security people. Since he (the Prime Minister) was asleep at that time, he could not be informed of the change." This upset Nehru and he told the private secretary, "I don't want to see your face."

The car reached the Red Fort. Nehru hoisted the national flag, addressed the nation and made his way back to Teen Murti. Everyone inside the car was quiet. The private secretary timidly handed a piece of paper to the Prime Minister. Nehru asked, "What is this?" The private secretary said, "Sir, this is my resignation letter." Since the Prime Minister did not want to see his face he felt he had no option but to resign. Nehru glanced at the piece of paper, folded it and tore it into small pieces. Then he flung the pieces out of the window. He leaned towards his private secretary and said, smiling, "Don't you know your Prime Minister?" The matter ended there.

While working at the AIR I once became a victim of Surendra Mohanty's whim. We had gone our separate ways after Surendra babu got actively involved in politics and journalism. Trying to make a living kept me terribly occupied. So we rarely met. However, this did not in any way render our friendship less intimate. Whenever we chanced to meet we would never discuss politics. We would find out in the course of our conversation what we were doing in the literary field. He would tell me, "Manu babu, I have in the mean time

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

watched your play *Banahansi* at the Nari Seba Sangh." I would ask him, "Have your novel *Nilasaila* been printed?"

That year Surendra babu had lost the election he had contested from Kendrapada. He was staying in Cuttack. If I remember right, he was editor of the daily, the *Kalinga* at the time. I went to meet him, and found him waiting for the town bus in Chandni Chowk. He was smoking a cigarette. When he saw me, he asked, "What brings you here?" I said, "I came looking for you and was told that you were waiting for the town bus." He was surprised. Was my work so urgent that I had to follow him all the way to the town bus stand? "What is the matter", he asked. We fell into talking, standing at a *paan* shop.

The centenary of Gandhi's birth fell in the year, 1969. To celebrate the centenary, the AIR had decided that a play based on Gandhi's life would be broadcast from all the stations in the country, in twelve parts, on the last Friday of every month for twelve months beginning from February, 1969.

There were times when the whims of government officials controlled literary decisions. One such whim placed a restriction on the broadcasting of plays in the AIR. We were told that in the play based on the life of Gandhi, the Mahatma himself would not be included as a character. Maybe, there was a rationale behind this decision. It was argued that the exalted place which Gandhi occupied in the collective psyche of the nation may be affected adversely if he was presented as a character in a play. Whatever the merit of this argument, writing a play on someone's life accepting such a condition was extermely difficult. There were several biographical plays in English. John Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln*, for example. But nowhere in the world the central character had been excluded from the play. So, writing a play on Gandhi, which would exclude Gandhi as a character, amounted to writing *Hamlet* without including the Prince of Denmark. In view of the conditions prescribed by the officials, I thought only Surendra babu could write the play on Gandhi. But I wondered if he would agree to accept the assignment, for it

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

involved submitting one instalment every month for a year. In other words, he would remain bonded to us, and we, in our turn, to him for a whole year. Failure to honour the contract even for once would land us in great trouble. It would not do to write a letter to Surendra babu and obtain his consent. So I personally went to persuade him to write the play.

When Surendra babu received the proposal he refused pointblank. I tried hard to get him to agree to accept the assignment. But he simply said, "No, don't press me." I was familiar with Surendra babu's moods. So I decided not to press him any further. I now wondered what to do next.

It was time for me to go to office. I took leave of Surendra babu. He seemed occupied, and his eyes had a vacant look. He then asked me, "Do you think I should write the play?" I said, "If I did not, I would not have taken trouble over coming all the way to this bus stop to meet you." Surendra babu smiled and said, "Why?" I knew when he softened. My reply had touched a soft spot in his heart. "The play you'll write would excel all other plays written on this subject in the country. This will bring glory to Oriya literature. Again, no one in Orissa has written a play on Gandhi's life yet. Why should you not be the first writer to do it?" My argument seemed to convince Surendra babu. He said, "All right, then."

It was decided that he would give me the script of a sequence one month before it was to be broadcast, and that he would receive a good amount by way of royalty. This play in twelve parts bore the title *Bapu*. It came to be broadcast on the last Friday of every month from February 1969. I assumed the charge of its production.

The play was an instant success, and was widely acclaimed by everyone. Then I suddenly came up against a terrible obstacle. It felt as if I had stepped on a thorn. I could not pull it out, nor could I bear the pain is caused.

A few instalments of the play on Gandhi got broadcast. We had reached the part which depicted Gandhi's arrival in Durban in South Arfica. He had travelled there on board a ship called 'Corland' in response to a telegram from Indian

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

traders and labourers, who requested him to come over and fight for their rights and dignity. Gandhi and other passengers were detained in the ship under the pretext of quarantine. Since the play was written like a feature, music effects and sound effects giving a background to the description and the dialogues assumed a great importance in it. It was the producer's job to add these effects. But Surendra babu often specifically mentioned what effects were to be used where. He listed a few sound effects, which would indicate that Gandhi's ship had anchored in at an African harbour. The list included the sound of the waves, the ship's siren, the sound of goods being loaded and unloaded, the bustle in the harbour. In order to make it clear that it was an African harbour, Surendra babu left the following instruction: a Zulu song sung in chorus by young men and women rose above the din and reached one's ear. The title of the third episode of the play was 'Aparajita' (The Undefeated).

I found myself in a tight spot. I felt that there was no need for playing a Zulu song either in the background of the dialogues or elsewhere in the play. The narrator made it clear that the ship had arrived at an African port. Even if such a song would render the scene more life-like and realistic, where did one find a song in Zulu ?

I rang Surendra babu. Like all authors, he was keen to find out what I thought of the script. He said, "Have you gone through the script?" I said, "Yes, I have. It is excellent. But why did you include a Zulu song in it?"

We talked about this for a while. I tried to explain to him how difficult it would be to incorporate this effect. But it seemed he was not at all willing to appreciate my problem.

Once Surendra babu made up his mind about something, he would remain adamant. So I wound up the discussion, saying, "I am now going through the script. Let's see what we can do at the time of production."

Surendra babu was not satisfied with a 'let's see' approach. Almost all writers feel that the slightest change in their texts would rob them of all their power. Maybe, Surendra babu

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was no exception. Or maybe, when I rang him, a whim had taken possession of him. He found it unacceptable that someone changed the effects he had included in his script. So he told me, "No, the effect must be included."

Surendra babu rang me again the same day. He repeated what he had said earlier, "Don't distort my script. If you do, I'll feel compelled to withdraw it." That Surendra babu could say such a thing seemed unbelievable. It came like a bolt from the blue. I knew him closely when he was a college student, in his early youth. I knew that nothing could deter him once a whim seized him. I found myself caught in a terrible dilemma. Arranging a song in Zulu was an impossibility. But, if one failed to include this effect in the production, Surendra babu would take serious exception. The Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Keshkar, was Surendra babu's friend. I could well imagine what a mess we would find ourselves in if Surendra babu insisted on withdrawing his script. No one would bother to go deep into the matter. Everyone would come to believe that Surendra babu took his script back because AIR could not produce the play properly. So it was but natural that I would be terribly worried.

Abani Kumar Das was Director, AIR at the time. He called me over the next day and said, "Surendra Mohanty rang me." I said, "He must have talked about that effect. But where could we get it from? It is simply not possible. How could we arrange zulu music effect?"

There was nothing Abani babu, for his part, could say. He only added, "Mr. Mohanty is very rigid as far as this effect is concerned." I said, "He must have threatened to withdraw his script?" "What he said almost amounted to that", Abani babu said. I asked him, "What do you want me to do now?" Ababni babu was a wonderful human being. But like all superior officers, he passed the buck to me, saying, "You talk the matter over with him again. You are so close to him. I am sure you'll be able to convince him." I could not explain to Abani babu how obstinate Surendra babu could be. As I was leaving his room after the discussion, Abani babu said, "Mr Mohanty

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

may phone me again." By this time, I was beginning to lose my patience. Abani babu passing the buck to me seemed patently unfair. I knew that the producer had every right to alter the script, where necessary. And the agreement which the author had signed with AIR provided for this. So, not entering into any further discussion, I said, "If he phones you, please tell him that you have passed his message to the producer."

Later, Abani babu reassured Surendra babu by giving this message to him. I set about producing the episode entitled "Aparajita" (The Undefeated). The effects were recorded, and the episode was broadcast. In all this I was assisted by Bhagaban Mohanty, who worked in the Drama section.

Surendra babu used to send the instalments of the play Bapu through someone, and, after the instalment got broadcast, he would come to AIR station at Madhupur Kothi and collect his cheque from the duty officer. The day after the episode entitled "Aparajita" was broadcast, I anxiously waited near the croton plant. He circumvented me. I felt very apprehensive. Did he deliberately ignore me? Did the broadcasting of the episode upset him? My mind oppressed by all these worries, I went back to my room. A little while later, the Director sent for me. I felt very nervous. When I went into Abani babu's chamber, I found Surendra babu sitting there. As soon as I entered, Abani babu said, "Surendra babu could not listen to the episode yesterday. Please make arrangements for replaying it to him."

Surendra babu looked grave. He exchanged only a few words with me. The situation was a fraught one. I asked Bhagaban to bring the cassette. After this, Surendra babu, Bhagaban and I made our way to the dubbing room, where the cassette was played. Surendra babu listened with rapt attention. I closely watched his reactions. We came to the point where Gandhi's ship reached the port at Durban. One heard the sound of the waves, the siren and the bustle in the harbour. In the background of these was the song sung in chorus by African young men and women.

The song had a slow rhythm. Although its language was

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

unintelligible, the words were clearly audible. A blend of dialogues and these sound effects carried the action forward. Surendra babu now kept staring at the tape turning on the play-back machine and listened attentively to every word recorded. He suddenly said, turning to me, "Manu babu, please rewind the tape a little." Bhagaban rewound the tape and replayed the Durban sequence. Now Surendra babu's face lit up. He moved his chair closer to me and said, "Beautiful effect. Where did you get it from?"

I said, "You wrote in your script a song sung in Zulu by African young men and women. That is where your reponsibility came to an end, and my problems began. And you told me over phone that if I failed to include this effect you would take your script back. Suppose you had done so, don't you think I would have lost my job?"

Surendra babu was eager to know where I got the effect from. I wanted to keep him on tenterhooks. So I said, "What could I do? I had to keep my job. So I contacted radio stations in other parts of the country. But I was informed that none of them had any African tribal song in store. At last, I made a request to the Chief Producer of AIR, Delhi. It was he who came to my rescue. He talked to someone in BBC, London and got him to send the effect through air parcel to Calcutta. The Station Director, AIR, Calcutta sent it here through a special messenger. I had to move from pillar to post to arrange this effect. Or else, could I have retained my job?"

Surendra babu was very pleased. He said, offering me a cigarette, "I knew, no one except you could have done it. This is an excellent production."

Surendra babu then went to the Director's chamber. I followed him there. He lavished praise on the AIR for its excellent production of the play. He also singled me out for praise. I asked Abani babu, "The episode was replayed to Surendra babu. Is he happy with the Zulu song?" Surendra babu said, "This is exactly what I was telling Mr Das. It was a superb production and Manu babu deserves all credit for this."

Our discussion came to an end. Surendra babu took leave

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

of us. I was following him out of the chamber, when the Director said to me in broken Oriya, "Please stay for a while." Then he asked me, smiling, "Where did you get the Zulu song from? Any way, You also saved my skin." I said, "You had passed the buck to me. I had to do something to get out of the mess."

Abani babu felt a little uncomfortable. I changed the subject, and said, "Have you ever heard a Zulu song? Have I ever heard one? Has Surendra babu? Or, for that matter, do our listeners know what a Zulu song is? So I decided to invent a Zulu song for the feature. I got a Santhali song recorded at one speed level, and then re-recorded it at a slower speed. I blended it with other sound effects. In this way, our Santhali song turned into a Zulu song. The words were clearly audible, but they now sounded as if they belonged to another language. My problem was solved, and everyone was happy in the end."

My reply made Abani babu burst into laughter.

Memories of incidents like these bring pleasure in the twilight of my life. I read somewhere that three Ts were essential for success. These are: Time, tenacity and tact. That day I had resorted to tact.

I had kept this from Surendra babu for a long time. A year after this incident, I went to his house, taking a copy of my newly published play *Aranya Fasal* as a gift. The play's publisher was Mahendra Mishra of Lark Books. He was also the publisher of Surendra babu's biography of Madhusudan Das, *Satabdira Surya* (The Sun of the Century). Surendra babu turned a few pages of my play with great interest. He then read out to me a few pages from *Satabdira Surya*. While he was reading, the incident relating to the episode in the play *Bapu* came to my mind and I could not help smiling. Surendra babu asked, "What's the matter?"

I had to come out with the secret. I said, "Do your remember the recording of the sequence entitled 'Aparajita' in the play *Bapu*? Remember the Zulu song?" Surendra babu said, "Yes, the effect had come out wonderfully well. But why do you mention it now?"

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

I continued, smiling. "I had told you a lie when I said that I had got that effect from BBC. It was a Santhali song recorded in Mayurbhanj and was played at a slower speed. In this way it became a Zulu song." Surendra babu burst out laughing. I was worried that he might take offence; but he didn't. He only said, "True. It was unreasonable on my part to have insisted on your including that effect."

The matter did not end here. A year or so later, someone I did not know came to my house, and left a packet with my name written on it. I opened the packet and saw that it contained Surendra babu's newly published book, *Bapu*. It was dedicated to the Director of the play and to the artists who had acted in it. I went through the book. I found that the stage direction regarding the Zulu song in the third episode of 'Aparajita', had been omitted. While sending the manuscript to the publisher, Surendra babu must have thought that the instruction was not practicable.

After I wrote *Abarodh* (1951), I could not write any plays for a few years, for I was distracted by too many problems. During the first few years after joining the AIR, I wrote only a couple of short plays or one-act plays. These brought me some comfort. But I always felt unfulfilled, dissatisfied. A time came when this sense of dissatisfaction overwhelmed me.

One day, in 1964, I was having a chat with Jatindra Mohan Mohanty, whom I fondly called Jati, in the sitting room of my house. Jati, who was an established critic of Oriya literature, is a close fried of my younger brother, Bibhuti. He is almost a part of our family. He is a student of English literature and was a voracious reader. When he was a student, he stayed in Kathagada lane. I used to visit him sometimes and browse the interesting books he had in his library. I developed a deep respect for his critical judgement.

In the course of our conversation, he said, "You should not confine yourself to writing these short plays. You should write more long plays." Then he said something which helped me get rid of my mental block, and made it possible to strike out in a new direction as a dramatist. He said, "There is no

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

playwright in the world who has established himself without having written a long play embodying new ideas. If you want to be a good dramatist you must write more long plays."

His remark came as a painful shock. I was shaken. But I realised the truth of Jati's observation. I resolved that I must leave the rivulets behind and jump into the ocean. I must write long plays.

Forming a resolution is one thing. Putting it into practice is another. If I had been an essayist or short-story writer, the situation would have been a different one. A dramatist has other problems to worry about: he needs a stage, where his plays will face their real test. Now I began worrying about where to stage the long plays I was going to write. By the seventies, the commercial theatre in Orissa was mired in internal squabbles. They were also beginning to disintegrate as a result of their swimming against the current of new ideas. I had parted company with them long since, for I had found myself out of step with them. Going back to them was out of the question. I now began toying with the idea of creating a new organisation, which would stage long plays, on the lines of the non-commercial institutions like Jana Sanskruti Sangha or United Artist, which we had set up in the past.

By this time I had already put in nearly six years at the AIR. My work in the drama section had brought me into contact with a very large number of artists, and had enabled me to make the acquaintance of many intellectuals. Hemant Das, who later earned great fame as a stage and film actor, joined the news section. At the time he had not even dreamt of acting in films. But even at that stage of his career, one could see that he had the makings of an extremely talented actor. I often said to him, "Hemanta, now that you have come here, why don't we think of doing something?" Hemanta, like me, was full of enthusiasm. He would always say, "Yes, we must do something." The subject cropped up whenever we met in the control room, or during rehearsals of plays or in the dubbing room. Soon we began thinking about the matter seriously.

Whenever we had nothing to do, we would spend time

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

at the AIR canteen. A Bengali gentleman ran the canteen. We called him 'dada'. A bel tree stood in front of the canteen. A bench and two tables had been set out in its shade. Here we sat holding plates full of fried savouries and discussed the state of Oriya theatre, the collapse of the commercial stage. Under this bel tree took shape 'Srujani'. On the day it came into being, we resolved that it would lead a new theatre movement, and not become yet another amateur theatre group. Srujani remained committed to this ideal until the very end.

'Srujani' put its first play on the stage in July 1964, the year in which it was born. The play was *Sagar Manthan*. It was an Oriya adaptation of the play *The Inspector Calls* written by the famous British playwright, J.B. Priestley. Three more plays were staged by Srujani after this: Biswajit Das's *Pratap Gadare Dui Dina* (Two Days in Pratapagarh), which was an Oriya adaptation of Gogol's *The Inspector General*, two of my plays, *Banahansi* and *Amrutasya Purtra*. Srujani was dissolved in 1971, after it staged *Amrutasya Putrah*, which ran for nine days.

An attractive brochure was printed every time before Srujani staged a new play. This was distributed among the audience free. Sometimes, a few members of the audience voluntarily gave us donations. The brochure, which was published to mark the occasion of Srujani's first production *Sagar Manthan*, carried a piece entitled 'Something about Ourselves' on its first page. I had drafted it. It reflected my point of view on the new theatre, which had been more or less endorsed by my friends in Srujani. This colourful brochure was printed by Mahendra Mishra, the proprietor of Lark Books. He was then staying in Dagarpara. His printing press was also located there. 'Something about Ourselves' said:

> We like reading plays, and watching them. Most of all, we like acting in them. Reading a play fills the heart with joy. Watching it makes one forget everything else in the world. When one acts in a play, one forgets oneself. But when that moment passes and we look back, we get the feeling that there is a void in the plays we have read, watched and acted in, that they have failed in leaving a

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

lasting impression on the mind.

We feel restless and try to find out why the void is there.

Many feel the way we do. 'Srujani' has been brought into being by some of those who feel like this. 'Srujani' believes that plays should not only entertain; they should also be able to provoke thinking. Srujani further believes that the playwright, the artists and the director should create something, which would challenge the spectator intellectually and leave an enduring impression on the conscious and unconscious levels of his mind.

All our brochures echoed our conviction, our new and original ideas.

On 2nd June 1968, Srujani staged *Banahansi*, which brought together three short plays, *Batya* (The Cyclone), *Kshudha* (Hunger) and *Hillola* (Ripples), which had been broadcast by AIR the same year. Srujani's earlier plays had been put on stage at Annapurna Theatre. Subsequently, the stage was not available. So we extended the platform in the Nari Seba Sangh at our own expense, and converted it into a stage. We received help from Kalinga Tubes, who gave us long pipes. The hall now became a nice auditorium, complete with a fully equipped stage. In the brochure prepared for *Banahansi*, we reiterated the objectives we had stated earlier. We also talked in it about our two earlier plays. We took the opportunity to discuss the impact of our theatre movement and touched upon the difficulties we faced. The brochure said:

> We are determined to keep pace with the changing taste of the audience, who now wants to watch plays of a high quality. Our play *Sagara Manthan* was a result of this awareness. This play came to be staged a number of times in Cuttack and was highly acclaimed by the newspapers, the audience and everyone else. But we cannot rest content with producing a couple of plays. We decided to stage plays at regular intervals. Keeping this in mind, we staged *Pratapgadare Dui Din* at Nari Seba Sangha Sadan. This

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was directed by Ananta Babu. This, too, was a great success and received high praise.

The Samaj had this to say of the production:

The direction, the acting and the setting of the play are so enjoyable that this play, full of humour and suspense, kept the audience enthralled from beginning to end, although it was performed in a single set and without an interval.

The Prajatantra wrote:

Pratapagadari Dui Din represents the sincere effort of artists associated with 'Srujani', who are determined to open up new possibilities for Oriya drama by adapting works written by world-famous dramatists to Oriya taste, and Orissan conditions. 'Srujani's first production, *Sagara Manthan*, was a great success. *Pratapagadare Dui Din* has also been a very successful production.

In the Legislative Assembly, a question as to whether financial assistance had been extended to 'Srujani' was raised. This was a measure of the success of the movement. We received invitations from many parts of Orissa to stage our plays. We went to Bhubaneswar and Baripada. But, soon afterwards, circumstances dealt such a cruel blow to 'Srujani' that it was left stunned. We refused to accept defeat, and, two years later came forward to stage our third play.

In the brochure printed to mark the occasion of the production of *Banahansi*, we wrote:

The first two plays we staged were modelled on two famous foreign plays. We have decided that the third play to be staged should be an original one, for only an original play can help us locate ourselves in relation to the experiments in the field of theatre going on all over the world. The production of *Banahansi* has taken longer than that of our two early plays; we had to devote nearly a year to it.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

The brochure contained two other important statements: one by me explaining why I chose to write a different kind of play; and another by Ananta babu justifying his use of an innovative method of directing the play.

We took great care to select the artists for our productions. Dhiren Das, who had vigorously campaigned for the revival of Oriya yatra was one of them. Others included established actors and young but talented ones. From the beginning, we had decided to limit the number of founding members of 'Srujani' to only ten. The members were: Dr Sukhalata Mohanty, Manoranjan Das, Anant Mohapatra, Hemanta Kumar Das, Bijay Krishna Mohanty, Gobinda Chandra Tej, Rabi Ray, Tushar Ranjan Panigrahi, Suresh Chandra Patnaik, and Yasodhara Das. After Dr Sukhalata Das's untimely death, Balaram Prasad Chaini was taken in her place. Among the members, Ananta babu, Hemant, Gobinda Tej, Tushar and Sukhalata acted on the stage; the others worked behind the curtain.

Hemanta and I gave much thought to the question as to what kind of person should be a member of 'Srujani'. Since I knew why theatre groups fell apart soon after they came to be formed, I repeatedly warned Hemanta, "We should form a group taking care to include in it only like-minded persons so as to make it homogeneous." So it took us long in the early stages to find members. It involved a lot of hard work. Whenever we went to the canteen near the bel tree, this inevitably came up the first thing during our conversation. We wondered if we had made the right choice by including someone's name in our list of members. Our list kept changing. Names were struck off the list after being included. However, there was one name, which we thought must figure in our list. We wanted Ananta babu to be with us. He joined us in the middle of our preparing the list.

I cannot remember exactly when I first got to know Ananta babu. But by the time we planned to form 'Srujani', I got to know him very well. He was the son of Justice Harihar Mohapatra, and was a drama artist of the AIR. He belonged

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

to an aristocratic and cultured family. His background had endowed him with a broader outlook on life. One thing about him earned my admiration: like Hemanta, in matters relating to art, he was a perfectionist. He was a close friend of Hemanta. He came occasionally to have a chat with him. When Hemanta mentioned his name in the early stages of working out a list of members for 'Srujani', I felt elated. It seemed as if I had found a lost treasure. His name naturally figured at the top of our list. After this, he joined us from time to time at the canteen near the bel tree or in the newsroom, and quickly set about building 'Srujani'. The other names, which followed that of Ananta babu belonged to Gobinda Tej, Biju and Dr Sukhalata. The name 'Srujani' was suggested by Hemanta.

No written rules had been framed for 'Srujani', nor was it registered under the Societies' Act, like other institutions. However, there were unwritten rules, which its members abided by as long as 'Srujani' lasted. Everyone did his or her bit, and we worked in harmony, like five fingers in a hand. Generally speaking, Ananta babu, Hemant and I selected the plays to be staged. Ananta babu directed the plays. Gobinda Tej and Hemanta remained in charge of stage management. Biju managed financial matters. The accounts were maintained on a daily basis by Chaini babu and Ananta babu. I sometimes took charge of printing of brochures and publicity.

When our first play was performed at Annapurna Theatre I used to sit at the booking counter until the curtain rose. Since we had to mention seat numbers on tickets during advance booking, the counter had to be kept open in the mornings and afternoons on the day of the show. The price of the tickets ranged from two rupees to ten. When we staged our plays in the Nari Seba Sangh hall, the booking counter was managed by either Chaini babu or me in the morning and by Prasant in the afternoon. Prasant was my nephew, and he had then joined Biju Patnaik's Kalinga Industry as an engineer. Before the show began and during it, I rushed from one to another endlessly to make sure everything went off smoothly. I had to do so, because Ananta babu, Hemant and Gobind Tej

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

remained tied to the stage. As a result, I was found all over the place: in the green room, near the wings, behind the last row of seats in the hall, at the booking counter, or in the open space outside the hall.

No effort was spared to maintain a high quality of Srujani's productions. As a producer and director, Ananta babu was a hard task master. The rules he had prescribed were strict ones, and were never relaxed in favour of anyone. Everyone had to arrive on the dot, and had to remain present at the rehearsals. Our plays had to go through sixty to one hundred rehearsals. For all our plays, Bhubaneswar Mishra was our music director. Only in *Amrutasya Putrah* the music was jointly composed by him and Akshay Mohanty.

Stage rehearsals were held for two nights before the play was first put on the stage. These were complete with music, setting, properties, light and sound effects. On occasions, costumes were also used. The presence of all the artists, technicians and music hands was compulsory during these rehearsals. Some friends of 'Srujani' stayed with us late into the night and encouraged us. Two of these friends deserve special mention. One is J.P. Das, who was then a young IAS officer and who later established himself as an eminent poet, dramatist and painter. The other is Dr Madhusudan Khadanga, who is a famous surgeon in Orissa. Ananta babu's cousin, Rabi Das, who was then a young industrialist, also came to give us help and moral support.

Finding a place where we could hold our rehearsals presented difficulties. We sometimes held the rehearsals in a house in Bania Sahi, which had been rented by National Music Association. At other times, our rehearsals were held in a room at Barabati Stadium. Nanda Krushna Das, the famous athlete, arranged this for us. In the end we came to use the auditorium of Rastrabhasa Prachar Samitee for this purpose. On some days when we could not get the key, or when there was a power-cut, we would sit in a circle in the lawn of the Stadium and rehearsed the play in the dark. It was great fun. It seemed to us as if we, who belonged to 'Srujani' were taking part in some

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

historic long march. Whenever someone failed to recall a dialogue, Dr Sukhalata Mohanty came to his or her rescue. We had spent many such evenings during the rehearsals for the play *Sagar Manthan*. Sukhalata was endowed with a phenomenal power of recall. After a couple of rehearsals, she could commit to memory not only her own part, but the whole play. She was a living computer.

Paucity of funds never created any problems for Srujani. Whenever we ran into financial difficulties, Biju helped us out. We made some money by printing advertisements in the brochures. We also received donations from some distinguished patrons. The income from the sale of tickets was also a substantial one.

With the production of *Sagar Manthan*, 'Srujani' electrified its target audience and generated an enthusiasm for new theatre. People who came to see the play talked about it to their friends who had not seen it. The newspapers gave it a lot of publicity. All these had a positive effect on the sale of tickets. Our productions were also advertised on the pages of newspapers such as The *Samaj* and The *Prajatantra*. These newspapers charged us a reduced fee. The advertisements did not boost the sale of tickets; but they enabled people to find out about the date, time and place of the production.

Everyone knows that advertisements cannot persuade people to see a play, if the play itself fails to appeal to them. Be it Broadway in the USA, or theatres in London, Moscow, Beijing, Warsaw or Sophia, this principle holds good everywhere. How long a play can run on the stage depends on the collective response of people who see it on the first few nights. In 1983, I visited three communist countries, Bulgaria, Poland, and the USSR as a delegate of the Government of India to acquaint myself thoroughly with theatre there. I was the only one to be sent to these countries in the first phase of the Government's cultural exchange programme. The visit gave me an opportunity to see some very good plays. I interacted with distinguished playwrights, stage directors, artists, technicians and managers. I watched rehearsals, met artists in the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

green room, and talked to technicians. After the shows came to an end, I took a close look at the stage and the auditorium in order to learn about how they had been built. I attended meetings held by actors' unions and spoke to them on theatre in India. I met noted playwrights, actors and directors personally and discussed with them aspects of theatre.

The Polish theatre was then like a diamond in that nation's crown. Although Poland was a communist country at the time, as far as theatre was concerned, it was a free world. Every new experiment in theatre anywhere in the world found its way to the Polish theatre. In different theatres of Warsaw original plays as well as plays translated from other languages were put on the stage. All kinds of plays—new-wave, realistic, absurd, existentialist, surrealist, non-verbal—were performed. At one theatre a comedy was enacted; at another a highly thought-provoking play was staged. Polish theatre was like a theatrical market place, which catered to all kinds of tastes.

Theatres in the USSR and Bulgaria were not lagging behind Polish theatre. Russian theatre was slightly conservative in the choice of plays it chose to put on the stage; but the situation of Bulgarian theatre was different. Anyway, the quality of production in the theatres of all three countries was very high indeed. Since all the three countries were under communist rule, and since theatre was subject to state control there, I was keen to find out what role advertisements played in attracting people to theatre. Although the answers to my enquiries were more or less the same in all the three countries, in Bulgaria I got a very convincing answer to my query during a long discussion I had with Mr Kalijo Georgiev, who was director-in-chief of the famous Theatre Sophia. People's passion for theatre in this small country amazed me. I compared Bulgaria with Orissa and India. The population of Bulgaria then was one crore only, and the country boasted of thirty-six theatre halls, seven opera houses, one musical theatre hall and twelve halls for puppet shows. Of these, fourteen elegant halls were located in the capital city, Sophia, itself.

I was to meet Georgiev on the eve of Diwali. At this time,

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Mayakovsky's controversal play *The Bed Bug* was being staged at Theatre Sophia. I had read the play in English translation earlier (Max Hayward, Penguin Books, 1966). So I was eager to see it being put on the stage. I decided that I would go to the stage long before the show began, and discuss Bulgarian and Indian theatres with the Director-in-chief.

During this tour, I used to record my experiences during the day in my diary. This is what I wrote on that day. I and my interpreter, Demetriev walked down the beautiful streets of Sophia, and half an hour later, came near a park full of large maple and pine trees. We crossed the park, treading its green grass and drifts of dead leaves, and reached the premises of the theatre, which lay on the other side. There we found Mr Giorgiev waiting for us. We had to pass through a huge lounge and negotiate several winding paths before we reached his room on the topmost floor of the building. Coffee arrived and our discussion began. Although Demetriev translated what we said to each other, when we talked about theatre, we did not feel the need for an interpreter, and could easily understand each other.

I opened the discussion saying, "I hail from a large and great country. I am sure you are acquainted with our glorious history. After independence, India is striding forward towards a prosperous future. I salute you and, through you, the great artists of your country on behalf of the people and theatre artists of my country. Bulgaria occupies a special place in the world of modern theatre. I hope that our two nations should get closer in the field of theatre, and I therefore would like to know more about your dramatic tradition and the history of modern theatre in your country."

Giorgiev gave me an account of the growth of modern Bulgarian theatre, which had come into being a hundred years ago. He then talked about Theatre Sophia in particular. "About fifty percent of all plays staged here are plays written by Bulgarian writers. The rest are chosen from among plays written in other languages. Our Theatre has five playwrights in its payroll. They receive salaries like artists and technicians. But

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

they are not required to come to the office regularly. A playwright writes a play, once a year or in a year and a half." Then he laughed and said, "Writers are lazy everywhere." As Bulgaria was a communist country, I asked, "Are writers prescribed subjects on which they should write or are they free to write what they want to?"

Giorgiev understood what I wanted to say. He motioned the interpreter to stop translating my words and said, laughing, "No, Mr Das. Nothing is imposed on playwrights here. They are free to write according to their ideas." I looked at him with wide-eyed wonder. "The playwrights know the policy of the theatre well. They are guided by the policy of the theatre."

His reply sounded like a one-sided explanation. But I kept quiet out of politeness. He said that his theatre always had twenty plays at hand. Every year, five or six plays were dropped and new plays were staged in their place. It took about two and a half month to put a play on stage. A play was rehearsed fifty-five to sixty times. The rehearsals went on from 9 AM to 1 PM.

The cost of producing a play ranged from five to twenty-five thousand levas. Generally speaking, a play could be produced at an expense of ten thousand levas. (At the time one leva was equivalent to nine rupees twentyone paise). The government grant for this theatre was 1-2 million levas. The price of tickets was kept very low. A ticket cost only one leva and a half. Giorgiev explained, saying, "It is not the aim of the theatre to make money. We want that more people should come to see the plays." I smiled, nodding assent. But, actually, I was consumed by a feeling of shame.

The difference between theatre in Bulgaria and that in our country struck me. How much support theatre receives in our country? Does our country feel responsible for theatre in any way? To what use does our society want to put theatre? What purposes do theatres in our country have? But, luckily for me, Giorgiev did not put any of these questions to me and spared me much embarrasment. Instead, he went on giving

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

me details about Sophia Theatre: it had 243 people employed under it; these included 63 theatre artists, five painters, five playwrights, four directors and one music composer. The director and the artists received a salary of 290 levas per month. The playwrights received a monthly salary of 250 levas. Besides this, they were entitled to 10 percent of the income made from the sale of tickets for their plays. The situation of Bulgarian playwrights made me feel envious. In comparison, playwrights in our country seemed extremely unfortunate. They neither receive any staging royalty nor even get invited when their play is put on stage.

When a play becomes a hit on a Bulagarian stage it runs for about hundred days. One of Sophia Theatre's hit plays was Eugene O'Neil's *Moon for Dead*. The theatre had two auditoriums. The bigger one could seat 500 persons, and the smaller one, 250. Giorgiev told me that advertising had little influence on the sale of tickets in Bulgaria. There seemed to be no need for giving publicity to stage productions. From a survey, they had learnt that the opinion of the theatre-goers was what determined the sale of tickets the most. They discussed the play they liked after they had seen it, and the fame of the play would spread by word of mouth far and wide. The opinion of the members of the audience, the fame of the playwright and that of the actors and actresses cast in a play drew 78% of the theatre-goers, who went to see that play. This strategy 'Srujani' had adopted from the moment of its inception. So, it pleased me when Giorgiev elaborated on the Bulgarian method of publicizing a play.

During the period when Srujani put its plays on stage, no government support for theatre was available. Whatever little financial help theatre groups received occasionally from the government was woefully inadequate. Srujani, for its part, never tried to get any government grant. We were convinced that asking for or expecting government grant would spell doom for our organisation.

When we set up Srujani, commercial theatre in Orissa had fallen on very bad times. It was the beginning of the end

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

for them. Although advertisements cost much less than they do these days, we were not in favour of unnecessarily advertising our plays in newspapers. After a few shows, the audience response to a play spread through word of mouth and through newspaper reviews. The audience warmed to the first production of Srujani, which was my adaptation of an English play, on the day it was first put on stage. The hall used to be full to the brim. At times, we had to send some people away because all the tickets had been sold out. A particular incident comes to my mind. At that time, *Sagara Manthan* was being staged at Annapurna Theatre. I was in charge of selling tickets. The play was about to begin. The seat chart before me was full of red crosses indicating that all tickets had been sold.

I used to join other members of 'Srujani' in a prayer, which was held just before the curtain rose. So I was in a hurry. Just at this time, a hand clutching a sheaf of currency notes pushed itself through the slit in the booking counter. I said, "Sorry, we are sold out." A voice from the outside replied, "Please, somehow give us tickets." A face pressed itself against the slit of the counter. I could recognise it, for it belonged to Rabi Das. I found myself in a tight spot. How could I explain to Rabi that it was awkward to sell a ticket to someone when the auditorium was full to capacity. So I called him into the cramped little booking room.

Just as looking at a hill, it is difficult to say if it is a volcano or not, it was impossible to form an idea of Rabi's future from looking at him at the time. But he was different from slogan-mongering, half-baked political radicals of the time. Short, broad-chested and strongly built, Rabi was of a very calm disposition, and there was always a smile on his face. He had given up his higher studies, but he nevertheless remained a student all his life. He was deeply influenced by Marxist thought, and for a time, worked for an established leftist political party. However, his genuine feeling for the oppressed, and his determination to fight for their liberation in his own way led to his disenchantment with the party and he soon left it. He now started writing articles in Oriya in which he analysed

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

economic issues and complex issues in Marxist theory. He came to be closely associated with a literary magazine, *Sammukhya* (The Front), which was edited by Professor Radhanath Rath. This magazine had created quite a stir among writers and intellectuals.

He used to hold me in high esteem, and brought me the issues of *Sammukhya* regularly. When *Sammukhya* ceased publication, we got out of touch with each other. Much later, I was told that he had joined a radical group on the Andhra-Orissa border, which was engaged in a violent struggle to liberate poor, oppressed and exploited tribals from forces of oppression.

I showed the seat-chart to Rabi and said, "See, all the seats have been taken. Come tomorrow. I'll keep a few seats reserved for you. The hall is so full, people who bought lower-class tickets are standing leaning against the wall." On hearing this, Rabi's face lit up. The time of the prayer on the stage was drawing nearer. I was getting restless. But Rabi would not let me go. He laid some currency notes on the table and said, "Give us five ten-rupee tickets. We'll watch the play standing like the others in the lower class." I had no option but to give him five tickets. That day our income from the sale of tickets was the highest: eleven hundred sixty-four rupees.

Outside 'Srujani', a tradition of plays being put on the stage by theatre groups had got established. Whenever a new play came to be staged, ministers, political leaders or officers were invited as chief guests, guests of honour or speakers, etc. They were garlanded, and hymns in their honour were recited. They inflicted long and boring speeches on Oriya theatre and Oriya drama on people who had bought tickets and gone there to see the play. They made insincere promises and dispensed useless advice. The play would begin only after this long-drawn-out farce came to an end. No one knew how to come to the rescue of poor and hapless Oriya theatre-goers. However, we at 'Srujani' never ever organised any such lectures as preludes to our productions. In our eyes, all the members of our audience were equal. On the first night of the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

production of a play, we invited only a few journalists and people who had directly or indirectly helped us.

'Srujani' set a high value on punctuality. It believed that practice was better than precept. Our plays always began on the dot, without even a minute's delay. We abided by a few unwritten rules. Five minutes before the curtain rose, we all would assemble on the stage, forming a circle, and pray in silence for two minutes. After this everyone returned to his or her appointed place of work. The artists who were to appear on the stage when the curtain rose remained on stage, and those, whose turn was to enter the stage after the action began to unfold, waited at the wings. Those who had nothing to do at this point moved away from the stage, or went to the green room. We all took care not to make any noise behind the curtains. 'Srujani's productions had dispensed with the prompter. During the long rehearsals, everyone was able to commit their parts to memory so thoroughly that we did not even feel the need for taking the manuscript of the play on to the stage.

When the clock struck seven I would appear on the stage facing the audience. Paying them my respects, I would state our objectives, taking exactly a minute and a half. This was something like the signature tune, which preceded news bulletins on radio or television. I used to emphasise the fact that what we were doing was more than staging a play; we were inaugurating a new theatre movement. I said, "If you like the play, if you are persuaded that there is need for a theatre movement, please tell your friends about us. If you don't like the play, please come and talk to us." After saying this, I would part the curtains and disappear into the stage. The lights would go out. A moment later, they would come on again, and the performance would commence.

Our sense of commitment during the early days of 'Srujani', the distinctiveness of our production, and the 'prologue' we kept repeating before the curtain rose certainly helped our theatre movement and made people look upon drama and the stage with a new respect. These led the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

audience to see plays from a new point of view.

The rules of conduct we had voluntarily imposed on ourselves proved very useful in inspiring a sense of discipline in the members of the audience. We resisted the temptation of selling tickets after a show began. We used to close the doors of the hall just before the curtain rose, and turned away people who arrived late for the show. In doing so, we did lose a few theatre-goers, but, in the long run, we benefited. Members of the audience now arrived before the curtain rose, took their seats and waited silently for the performance to begin.

There is a saying that a nation is known by its theatre. The theatre of a nation enables us to find out about the intellectual level attained by it, its social problems, its dreams and its anxieties. During its brief life, 'Srujani' strove to become a theatre like this.

'Srujani' ceased to exist after the staging of *Amrutasya Putrah*. The play was staged in August 1971. It ran for four days. It was put on stage again in September, and was performed for nine consecutive days. After this, no more plays were produced by 'Srujani'. Our attempts to revive it came to nothing. During its seven years' existence, we had staged four plays in all: *Sagara Manthan, Pratap Gadare Duidin, Banahansi* and *Amrutasya Putra*. In this period, other group theatres such as 'Rupkar', 'Sanket', 'Friends Union' appeared on the scene. I have no doubt that they all played an important role in shaping the theatre-goers' sensibility. If the sale of tickets is taken as a measure of success, 'Srujani', around 1971, sold more tickets than commercial theatres, which managed to earn 50-60 rupees daily from a show. Till its very end, 'Srujani' remained a name to reckon with. I learn from my diary that on 4 August 1971, we had earned four hundred rupees from the sale of tickets. It was quite an achievement, considering the circumstances.

When we set up 'Srujani' we had resolved that we would maintain high standards in every area of production, and never lower these under any pretext.

Since *Sagara Manthan* had been adapted from an English play, and also because it happened to be our first production,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

we chose to pay particular attention to lighting. We were convinced that colourful costumes, gorgeous sets, or a large number of irrelevant songs contribute nothing to the success of a play. Lighting, like theme music, helps create the right mood in the audience and enables it to respond properly to a particular moment in the play. *Sagara Manthan* was full of suspense. We wanted the lighting on the stage to reflect its fast-changing moods.

In *Sagara Manthan*, a character called Sandhya Das commits suicide by consuming poison. Although all characters in the play came into her life in one way or another, they all now wash their hands clean of her. The play centred on this act of shirking responsibility on their part. Of this a character called Abadhut Rao reminds other characters in the play, saying, 'One Sandhya Das is dead. But millions of Sandhya Dases remain alive in us. She had become a part of the flux of our lives. We have become one and the same. We are responsible for each other. Remember, if human beings forget this, they have to learn it again through a baptism of fire, through a horrible bloodbath, through intense suffering."

The stage grows dark towards the end of this speech. When Abadhut Rao says, 'a baptism of fire, a horrible bloodbath', thousands of flames leap up behind him through a special lighting arrangement. These die out as soon as Abadhut Rao exits from the stage. The flames thrill the members of the audience, and provoke them to think.

When we decided to stage *Sagara Manthan*, we started looking for someone who would bring an element of creativity to lighting on the stage. Luckily, our friend Kiranmoy Raha, who was then a highly placed official in the income tax department in Cuttack, came to us as a godsend. He had not only a passion for theatre; he was deeply knowledgeable about the theatre groups performing in Calcutta. After retirement, he settled in Calcutta, and his book *Bengali Theatre*, written in English, came to be published by National Book Trust. He introduced us to a great lighting expert from Calcutta. He was none other than Tapas Sen, who was associated for a long time

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

with Sambhu Mitra's 'Bahurupi' in Calcutta. He was lighting director for *Setu*, a play which was put on stage in Calcutta by 'Biswarupa' and which had a run of a thousand nights.

Tapas Sen came to Annapurna Theatre, where 'Srujani' was staging its plays, accompanied by two assistants and carrying a lot of equipment. Besides travelling allowance, we paid him eight hundred rupees per show. In time, he became a close friend of 'Srujani'. He liked the disciplined way in which we functioned. Soon afterwards, he charged us nothing for preparing the lighting schemes of our subsequent productions. We only gave his assistants their travelling allowances and the rent for the equipment. Even this we did not have to pay later. A special switchboard for Srujani's productions was made according to his instructions.

My younger brother Bibhuti and Gobind Tej took turns to manage the lighting with the help of local electricians. In the last days of 'Srujani', Gobind Tej and Ananta babu took charge of the lighting. The well-known lighting expert in Cuttack, Madhu Dutta, came forward to help us on a regular basis. He charged us a small fee.

Tapas Sen remained a friend even after' Srujani' was no more. He received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1974 in recognition of his expertise in the field of stage lighting. I met him from time to time at the office of Pratibha Agrawal's 'Natya Shodh Sansthan' in Calcutta, in the corridor of Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi, or in some theatre hall in Calcutta, where 'Bahurupi' staged one of its plays. We used to talk about his latest project. Whenever I met my friend Samik Bandyopadhya, the well-known theatre and film critic, in Calcutta, I would enquire after Tapas Sen, about the experiments he was engaged in. Whenever I thought of 'Srujani', I always remembered Tapas Sen. His contribution to stage lighting and his association with 'Srujani' remained inseparable.

Besides lighting, the set designs, costume, effects and direction—every department of the production of a play had something to contribute to the intellectual aspect of the play. 'Srujani' had made a significant contribution to the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

popularisation of the stage-play. The audience, which was beginning to lose interest in the stage, once again reaffirmed their faith in it. The theatre-loving people from far-off places now came to Cuttack to watch the performance; letters came pouring in, requesting us to book tickets in advance. We felt encouraged by the positive popular response.

I recall the days when *Amrutasya Putrah* was being staged at Nari Seba Sangh Hall. It was autumn. I used to stay near the hall before the performance began. Normally, I looked after the guests, saw and sorted out problems, if any. I used to go to the stage when the performance began. One day as I was hurrying to the stage, I noticed a car entering the premises. A lean man asked the driver to park the car and rushed to the counter. I asked the man at the counter to book a seat on the front row and requested the gentleman to follow me. He hesitated. His reply was, "I appreciate your sense of discipline. I don't want to break the rules. Let me buy a ticket." I said, "It'll be late, sir. Please come with me and occupy a seat. We can give you the ticket later." The man was none other than Justice Raj Kishore Das. Justice Das, who was a judge in the Orissa High Court for about seven years, retired in 1967. He loved theatre and patronised it. He helped Annapurna B group to survive for a long time. He always came forward to help the theatre and the people associated with the stage. I had the highest esteem for this theatre-loving person. That was why I personally escorted him to the hall that evening. At the interval, I handed a ticket to him and received its price. He was very pleased, and he gave us his blessings.

It was an irony that in spite of the blessings of elders and support of the audience, 'Srujani' could not last long. After the production of *Amrutasya Putra*, 'Srujani' started disintegrating. We, its members, did not find the time to sit together as we used to do before we took the decision to put up a performance. Most of us got absorbed in our own personal affairs. Lack of will-power, the feeling of exhaustion, growing indifference of the members—all these contributed to Srujani's ultimate demise.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

One of the main obstacles on the path of progress of the Orissan stage was want of actresses. Girls and women from a few established families, and medical students and professionals came forward to participate in radio plays. But it was different in the case of stage plays. Commercial stages—Annapurna, Roopashri, Janata and Kalashri—had women artists, most of whom had not studied beyond Class-VII. After 'Srujani' was formed, many educated girls—Sukhalata Das, Urbashi Tripathy alias Joshi, Jharana Das, Sanjibani Sudha Patnaik and Tulasi Ojha—were drawn to the stage. But most theatre groups had to depend on a limited number of female artists, either on those who had left the commercial stage or those who found it difficult to get a job. The want of female artists posed a serious problem to any theatre group. One day, the problem also became an acute one for 'Srujani'.

'Srujani' put up its second play, a comedy, *Pratap Gadare Duidin* (Two Days in Pratapgarh) in January 1965. The play was a tremendous success. We decided to stage the play for several days again after a gap of a few days. The second phase of its performance was to begin on a certain Saturday. Four days before the performance, on Tuesday, we came to know that the lady playing the lead female role would not be available. She had been very much loyal to 'Srujani', but she could not act in the play for some personal reasons. Ananta babu, Hemant and myself felt deeply disturbed. It was not difficult to guess the person responsible for her change of mind. Although he was not directly associated with Srujani, he was a friend to most of us. We tried to prevail upon him by explaining our position. But it was all in vain. We decided to continue to advertise the performance till Friday. If things did not improve by then, we would announce on Saturday that the performance had been postponed due to unavoidable reasons.

The news about the non-availability of the actress had spread in Cuttack, especially among theatre-lovers. They were surprised to see the advertisement in the newspapers. We had started making efforts to find a substitute for the lead female role. It was a daunting task for any young lady to prepare

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

herself for the stage in the space of only four days. A young medical student, who had taken part in radio-plays, came to our mind. Her father worked in the education department. They were our neighbours in Kujang. That was why the onus of persuading the girl's parents fell upon me.

In the evening, Ananta babu and I started for the girl's house, which was in Kafla area. We knocked at the door. An elderly lady came out. She obviously could not place me. It was not to be expected that she should recognise someone whom she had not seen for more than twenty years. I introduced myself and reminded her of the days at Kujang. I told her about my parents, which helped her to recognise me. She asked us to get in and offered us seats. When she came to know that I was working in All India Radio, she called her daughter, who, she thought, might be knowing us. Her daughter was surprised to see us. Her father had gone to the market and was expected soon. I told them that I had work with all of them, particularly with the girl. She was taken aback. I told them all about 'Srujani' and the play to be staged. I also explained how everything now depended on her decision.

It was rather a long wait for her father. At last he came and heard us out. He and his wife went inside, maybe in order to talk things over in private. A little later, they came back to the drawing room. The gentleman now looked at his daughter and asked her, "What do you say?" The daughter said, "I have no objection." Her father said, "All right, then."

Anant babu was waiting for me in the car, a handkerchief covering his nostrils. Maybe, the stench of the gutter had proved too much for him. When he saw me approaching him, with a smile on my face, he was left in no doubt that our play would be staged on Saturday. The rehearsals were held twice a day for four days. On Saturday, the play *Pratapgadare Duidin* was put on the stage. Kunjalata Nanda, the girl, who now played the lead female role in it, impressed everyone with her brilliant acting. She had managed, in the short space of four days, to commit the whole play to memory.

We, who were associated with 'Srujani' used to meet at a

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

dinner before we decided to stage a new play. Important decisions were taken here after much discussion. And, after a play was produced under the auspices of 'Srujani', we invited a few members of the audience to a discussion, usually on a Sunday, and sought their opinion about the production. We also answered their queries regarding the play. Their views were published in the newspapers and influenced public opinion. In all our discussions, a great deal of respect was shown to individual opinions and voices of dissent.

After *Pratapagadare Duidin* was staged, we met at ShriRam Chandra Bhavan, Cuttack in January 1968 to decide what our third production should be. As always, Bijay Krushna Mohanty was entrusted with the responsibility of arranging the funds for our next venture. As far as the script was concerned, the choice was between an Oriya translation of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, which I was already doing and was half-way through, and my original play *Banahansi*. Most of our friends were in favour of staging *All My Sons* for they thought it would be a safe bet. But I differed from the majoirty opinion and pleaded for *Banahansi*. I argued that new experiments were now being made in theatre all over the world and that we must be part of this movement. I suggested that, by staging *Banahansi*, 'Srujani' could assume the role of a pioneer. In the end, everyone present accepted my view, and we set about casting the play.

It took us five months to put *Banahansi* on stage. At last it was enacted on 2nd June 1968 at Nari Seba Sangh Sadan. We had planned for seven shows in the first phase.

The interval between the day we decided to stage *Banahansi* and the day it was staged was a time of great anxiety for me. I was apprehensive that, if the play failed on the stage, I would have to take all the blame. It might also have an adverse effect on the plays I would subsequently write. However, my fears proved unfounded when the play was put on stage. The audience response gave the lie to the belief that experimental plays would be rejected by theatre-goers. The play received high praise from the press and was recognised

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

as a bold step in a new direction. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* expressed the hope that *Banahansi* would prove a truning point for Oriya drama.

I always believed that the real test of a good play is its success on the stage. So I felt reassured when *Banahansi* appealed to the audience. I thought I would write another play, which would be produced by 'Srujani'. This was not to be. My next play, *Aranya Fasal* could not be staged under the auspices of Srujani. However, this group produced my play *Amrutasya Putrah*. After this play was staged, a number of writers and journalists came to interview me. They invariably asked me a last question: "Has anything happened in your writing life which you have never been able to erase from your mind?" I had no option but to answer this. The amusing incident which kept recurring in my mind was as follows:

I was in the middle of writing *Amrutasya Putrah*. It was a summer night. My wife and I slept on a mat spread on the floor in a room upstairs. It was the small hours of the morning. There was a power failure. I got up, sat at the desk and started writing. I had brought a candle from the shelf. I don't remember how long I went on writing like this. I was totally unaware of the world around me. I was only aware of what the characters in my play had to say. In the mean time, my wife woke up and was shocked to see me writing away by candlelight. But she did not disturb me. Before I had gone to sleep, I was thinking hard about what Sanatan, a character in my play, would say at its conclusion. Maybe, for this reason, the characters suddenly came alive and talked among themselves before me. Like a stenographer, I merely took down what they said. Wasn't it really exciting and unforgettable?

The way Hemant played the role of Sanatan in *Amrutasya Putrah* left a lasting impression on my mind. Two theories of acting prevail in the history of dramatic art. One theory had been propounded by Stanislavsky, the famous director of Moscow Art Theatre. According to him, the actor should completely identify with the character whose role he plays. This feeling of oneness will create an impression that it is the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

character who is acting. The other theory had been propounded by Bertolt Brecht, the German dramatist and director. According to this, there should not be any illusion that the character is acting in the play. It should be made amply clear that the actor is merely playing a role. The impression that the actor and the character are separate entities would enable the spectators attempt an objective assessment of the performance. Brecht put this theory into practice in his epic theatre.

Hemanta belonged to the first category. He could enter into the character of Sanatan. In the play, Sanatan is made to stand for eternal values. The character had been set against the background of time. He wants to shake the world out of its centuries old stupor and complacency. His views sometimes terrify Sucheta, the play's heroine. The following is an exchange between Sanatan and Sucheta:

Sanatan : (Clutches Sucheta's hands)
Are you afraid? Look at me closely. You'll have no fear.

Sucheta : Why look at you?

Sanatan : What do you mean? I am Sanatan. I am Lord Shiva, the destroyer. (Sanatan lets go Sucheta's hand. He stands on a chair and assumes the *tandaba* pose. The stage grows dark, and the spotlight is focussed on his face)

Sucheta : Sanatan !

Sanatan : I have come to lay your so-called, man-made civilization to waste. I'll remove the fear that lies frozen in the human heart. I'll liberate man from the trap he has set for himself. I bring with me a new charter of freedom. I am the symbol of a new era. I am a racing horse. I am a tornado. I am the sound of the conch blown by Time. I'll destroy in order to create.

Hemanta's performance in the role of Sanatan was unforgettable. He brought the character vividly to life. His brilliant acting put me in the mind of Sisir Bhaduri's great

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

performance in the Bengali play, *Ramera Sumati*, which I had watched in Calcutta many years before.

The circumstances under which *Aranya Fasal* came to be written made me feel that books, like human beings, had a destiny. At the time, Annapurna Group B was passing through a bad time. Priyanath Mishra, the famous stage actor, who had joined Annapurna after leaving Orissa Theatres, was now trying to revive its fortunes. I regarded him with great respect ever since I saw him act in Kali Charan Patnaik's *Girl School* in 1940s. He suggested that I write a play for Annapurna (B). I agreed on the condition that they should not expect me to write every scene according to their specifications: I would give them a finished play and would not object to making alterations in it as long as these did not affect the central idea of my play. He agreed to the condition I laid down. I started writing a new play, *Aranya Fasal*, on the 1st of January 1969.

I was in the habit of writing something everyday. On some days, I could manage to write only a few lines after struggling for hours on end. On others, I could write pages in a very short space of time. In solitude, I felt as if my characters emerged like shadows and talked among themselves. I could hear what they said to each other and I took it down. I never went through what I had written until the whole play was finished. I thought it was necessary to do so to ensure that the play evolved naturally. For me, writing a play was similar to the process of putting up scaffolding at a construction site. Tampering with the base of the scaffolding would lead to a weakening of the entire structure.

I finished writing the play in March 1969. While writing it I never went back to whatever I had already written. I felt emptiness within me when the writing of the play came to an end.

Annapurna (B) Group, for its part, was looking for a play which contained many scenes and featured several characters. *Aranya Fasal* was a play with only six characters in it and was to be staged in a single set. So, putting the play on stage at Annapurna (B) was simply out of the question. And,

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'Srujani', after the production of *Banahansi*, had become rather sluggish. I could not visualise any other group coming forward to stage a play like *Aranya Fasal*. I asked Ananta babu to go through the manuscript of the play.

After Ananta babu read the play, we had a long discussion on it in my drawing room. Serious differences of opinion now surfaced. Ananta babu thought that the action of the play should not be confined to a lonely dak bungalow in a dense forest. He suggested that the action should unfold in an urban locale and consist of several scenes. Only in this way, he believed, the play would hold an appeal for the audience. I argued that in doing so, the central characters would not be able to experience the arousal of primordial instincts which their isolation in a dense forest would give rise to. Our discussion led nowhere and we agreed to disagree. After this discussion, the question of 'Srujani' producing *Aranya Fasal* did not arise.

The circumstances under which *Aranya Fasal* came to be staged were extremely interesting. After Srujani initiated a new theatre movement in Orissa in 1964, several theatre groups came into being. Friend's Union of Cuttack was one of them. A young lawyer, Ajay Mohanty led this group. In 1968, Bijay Mishra's new wave play, *Sababahakmane*, which he had directed, was adjudged the best play in a competition held by Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi. I once met him at the rehearsal of a play at the radio station. There he came to learn that I had written a new play. He asked me, "Who is staging it?" I could not bring myself to tell him that Srujani was not going to put it on stage. However, when he pressed me for an answer, I had to say that 'Srujani' would not produce it. He now asked, "Have you approached anyone else?" Before I could make a reply, he said, "Why don't you let us stage it?" I said, "You must first go through the manuscript. If you like it, you'll think of putting it on stage."

After the rehearsal, he accompanied me to my residence. There I started reading out the play to him. I was planning to read the whole play. But after I finished the first act, Ajay said, "Please stop. There is no need to go any futher." He then rolled

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the manuscript, tucked it under his arm and got up to leave. He said, "I'll return the manuscript after I get it copied." A few days later, he returned the original manuscript. In the mean time, the rehearsals had started.

I usually remained present at the rehearsals of all my plays. But it was not possible for me to remain present at the rehearsals of *Aranya Fasal.* I could manage to attend only one rehearsal a few days before it came to be staged. I liked Ajoy's directions. I also liked Dipen Ghosh who played Sangram. But other actors were not up to my expectations. So I felt a little disappointed. *Aranya Fasal* was performed at Kalashri Theatre on 11th July 1969.

Kalashri Theatre had been set up in 1966. It had already fallen on bad times. Plays were no longer performed there on a regular basis. The auditorium was taken on rent by theatre groups. Facilities for creating sets on the stage were poor. The chairs in the hall were in a bad condition. Half of the hall was packed with benches. The first few rows had wooden chairs; a few rows of tin chairs lay behind these. Many intellectuals maintained close links with Kalashri Theatre. However, like most theatres in Orissa, this had also fallen a prey to dissension, mismanagement and weak leadership. On a stage like this, *Aranya Fasal* came to be performed.

On the evening the play was to be staged, I went to visit the stage and the green room. Dhaneswar Rout of the Friends' Union, who was helping Ajoy in producing the play, showed me around. He had prepared the set of a dak bungalow on the stage. It was not bad. But the stage properties gave me cause for anxiety. Different stage properties were needed for the different acts of the play. For the second act, some freshly cut branches were required; for the third, dry branches and leaves. Some dialogues in the play referred to these. I had repeatedly asked the organisers to take care to arrange these. On reaching the stage I asked, "Where are the dry branches and leaves?" My worst fears came true. Let alone dry leaves and branches, they had not even bothered to bring freshly cut branches. Someone now rushed out to cut a few branches from someone's

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backyard and bring them over. This lack of seriousness upset me.

After this, I came in to the hall. Friends' Union had invited many distinguished persons to the premiere of the play. Many had already arrived. I was told that Professor Bidhubusan Das was coming from Bhubaneswar to grace the occasion as the guest of honour. Everyone was waiting for him. I held Professor Das in high esteem. He had been placed in charge of the green room when we staged a play in 1947 at Ravenshaw College to celebrate the attainment of independence. His interest in theatre remained undiminished.

The curtain rose after a long delay. On account of this, the invited guests could not deliver their lectures. The characters appeared on the stage, one after another. A hush descended on the audience. I was terribly scared. I watched the play, sitting in a middle row, beside Mahendra Mishra of Lark Books. After about ten minutes, one spectator whispered to his friend, "When will the play begin? What are these people talking about on the stage?" His friend said, a little annoyed, "The show has already started. Can't you see that everyone in the hall is now quiet?" The conversation between the two strangers reassured me. It was clear that there was nothing artificial about the acting and that the audience felt that what they saw happening on the stage was not an image of reality, but reality itself.

The show ended late at night. I did not notice when Professor Das had left. I did not ask him for his views when I met him later. Professor Das's links with *Aranya Fasal* did not end here. The English translation of the play was brought out by Oxford University Press, about ten years after the original Oriya play had been staged at Cuttack. A meeting was organised by the publishers to launch the book. Justice Harihar Mohapatra presided over the meeting, in which Gopinath Mohanty was the Chief Guest and Sitakant Mohapatra was the Chief Speaker. N. O' Brien, the Deputy General Manager of OUP and Samik Banerjee, an expert on drama, were present at the meeting. Mohapatra described the play as a play of

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silence. According to him, the silences between dialogues are more eloquent than the dialogues themselves. After the function was over, the original Oriya play was staged, under the direction of Bijay Mohanty, the reputed film actor.

Professor Prabhat Nalini Das and Professor Jatindra Mohan Mohanty translated the play into English. Professor Bidhubhusan Das wrote a preface to the English translation.

I met many friends after the play was over. But I did not feel like asking them for their views. I returned to my residence. Two incidents recurred in my mind. One was the question asked by a spectator: "When will the play begin?" The other was: an audience silently watching the performance and the silence deepening as the play progressed. These two incidents kept my hopes alive. Comments and reviews appeared in newspapers after the play was staged for the first time. The *Samaj* described the play as a milestone in the history of Oriya theatre. The newspaper made another important point by labeling it as an "absurd play." The so-called absurd plays in Oriya do not exactly portray the absurdity of the human condition, which the plays in English or other European languages seek to depict.

In course of time, the term "absurd" acquired certain definite meanings. Some thought it was a name given to modern western plays. A few considered plays written in an unconventional style to be absurd plays. Some playwrights took pride in describing their plays as absurd plays.

A few critics made an attempt to find the philosophy of western playwrights such as Adamov, Beckett, Genet and Ionesco in the works of Oriya dramatists. They did not hesitate to write articles and deliver speeches on the topic. By attempting to judge Oriya dramatic works by western standards, they certainly underestimated the native dramatists. However, there was always a possibility that those critics might not have gone through these plays in the first place.

The plays, which spread a new consciousness, were labeled 'absurd' plays. Although no effort was made to understand the meaning of these plays, they were dismissed as

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unintelligible works. There was a systematic attempt on the part of a few playwrights as well as stage artists to do so. It so happened that absurdity and lack of intelligibility were considered two sides of the same coin.

There was a lot of debate on whether *Aranya Fasal* was an absurd play. "It is in the nature of an absurd play commenting on the incongruity of modern life", the Sahitya Akademi citation said.

I have been asked time and again whether *Aranya Fasal* was an absurd play. Actually it did not matter much to me whether the play belonged to a particular category. I was indifferent to how others classified the play. But it was important for me to know if the play appealed to the readers. I also wanted to know how deeply it affected the audience.

In the mean time, the play came to be staged at different places. Educated people appreciated the play and put it on the stage. An educated young lady named Alaka Chand, who played Lily Burma in a production in Rourkela, wrote to me, "The role of Lily Burma completely engrossed me. I have been acting since I was aged ten. But I have never acted in a play like this" (July 7, 1972). I valued her comments.

Whenever I thought of *Aranya Fasal*, memories came crowding into my mind. A few days after Durga Puja in 1972, I received a parcel from Calcutta. It carried the puja number of the prestigious Bengali magazine, *Bahurupi*, edited by the famous stage director and actor, Sambhu Mitra. It was a complimentary copy for it contained the Bengali translation of *Aranya Fasal*. The other three translated plays published in it were a Romanian play, a play by Strindberg, and one by Ionesco. The possibility of *Aranya Fasal* being stage outside Orissa excited me. In our childhood, we used to staged Bengali plays in Oriya translation. I remember having arranged, with great difficulty, a copy of Aparesh Mukhopadhya's Bengali play *Karnajurna*, which I wanted to translate. Locating another Bengali play, *Karagar*, written by Manmathnath Ray had also proved difficult. Now the situation had changed. I hoped that Oriya plays would be translated into other

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languages and staged in other parts of India.

Aranya Fasal was translated into Bengali by Aurobindo Palit, who was my colleague at AIR, Cuttack. He had done a translation of the play while in Cuttack. Later, he got transferred to Calcutta. He had sent the manuscript of the translation of my play to *Bahurupi* without my knowledge. So it came as a pleasant surprise. One day, I received a letter from Palit saying that the Bengali version of *Aranya Fasal* would be broadcast by AIR, Calcutta on 21 December 1973. However, I was not able to listen to the braodcast. Later, I got a copy of the recording from AIR, Calcutta and listened to it. The production was an excellent one. A few days after this, I got a letter from Karol Bagh Bangiya Samsad saying that they were going to stage the Bengali translation of *Aranya Fasal* in the Indian Fine Arts and Crafts auditorium on 14 December 1973. The letter also mentioned that the play would be entered in the All India Drama competition. Similar letters kept arriving from different parts of the country.

Aranya Fasal brought new friends and relationships into my life. During the late seventies, when I was Secretary, Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi, I came to be closely associated with 'Sangita', a theatre group active in Jatni. It was led by its Director, Gopal De, who was also a playwright, actor, and musician. 'Sangita' used to organise an annual drama competition. To the annual drama festival held in 1980 had come the famous theatre group, Bengali Association of Nagpur. Debasish Ray, a middle-aged, gentle and soft-spoken man, was the director of this group. A very talented young woman, Ranjana Pathak, was associated with this group. She had taken a degree in drama from Nagpur University. Bengali Association staged plays in Bengali, Marathi and Hindi as well. On 15 October 1980, I received a letter from Debasish, in which he expressed his wish to stage the Marathi version of *Aranya Fasal* at the Maharastra State Drama Festival. Debasish translated the play into Marathi with the help of an Oriya doctor resident in Nagpur. Debasish wrote to me saying that my play was fifty years ahead of its time. The Marathi version was

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staged on 11 December 1980. I learnt that the play was a great success and had received favourable notices in the Marathi press. Debasish wrote to me of his plan to translate my play into Hindi. The Hindi version was staged at Jatni on 14 June 1981.

Subsequently, Debasish got transferred from Nagpur to Aurangabad. He continued to stage my play at Aurangabad. My links with Nagpur were maintained through Ranjana. In 1981, I received the central Sangeet Natak Akademi award for my achievement as a playwright. Since I was the only playwright in the country to be so honoured that year, public attention came to be focussed on me. Ranjana invited me to be one of the judges in the short play competition held in collaboration with Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. Debasish was also a member of the panel of judges. On the closing day of the competition, the stage artists organised a meeting to felicitate me on the occasion of my receiving the prestigious award. The meeting was presided over by Shivraj Patil, who was then a member of the Union Council of Ministers.

After two years, Debasish came back from Nagpur. He now produced the Hindi translation of *Bitarkita Aparahna* (Uljhi Dopahar). The play was directed by him and staged at Jatni (Khurda road). Debasish, Ranjana and Prasanta Patil acted in the play. From Jatni they came to Cuttack and spent some time with me.

My relationship with Debasish and Ranjana grew closer. Probably we came closer to one another through the characters in my play. Ranjana was greatly impressed by my analysis of the feminine psyche. Perhaps that inspired her confidence in me. She treated me like her elder brother. My relationship with Debasish was equally close. He would talk freely about his problems to me. One day in January 1985 I received a phone call from him late at night. He said, "Dada, I am calling from Raipur. We came here to take part in a drama competition held jointly by the Art Academy and Mahamandal, Raipur. We staged your play *Uljhi Dopahar*. It was a great success. I was adjudged the best director. Jayanta bagged the best

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music director's award, and Prasant Patil, who played Bulbul, was adjudged the best actor."

My plays have brought me close to people all over the country, who are associated with stage. I came in contact with Gobind Gupta and Bijaya Gupta, both of whom were students of the National School of Drama, Delhi. Gobind Gupta was in charge of the Bhubaneswar branch of the Song and Drama Division, which functioned under the Union Government. He used to stage Hindi plays under the banner of International Theatre at the place of his posting. My play *Sabdalipi* had been translated into Hindi jointly by Bijaya Gupta and M.A. Dayan. The play was put on stage on 16 January 1977, under the direction of Gobind Gupta. Bijaya Gupta played the lead female role in it. Young artists of those days, Direndra Nath Mallik, Narayan Pati, Bidhu Roul and Mihir Meher played different roles in the Hindi version. After this, Gobind Gupta staged this play wherever he was transferred.

The Bengali translation of *Sabdalipi* was made by Gopal Dey. It was staged at the Theatre Centre in South Chakraberia Road, Calcutta on every Sunday evening in July 1984. The Centre had been set up by the Bengali playwright, Tarun Roy, who wrote under the pen name, Dhananjay Bairagi, and was the head of the Drama department of Rabindra Bharati University. His wife, Krishna Roy, popularly known as Dipanwita Roy, was an eminent stage-artist. Pranab Bhattacharya directed the Bengali production. Sibabrata Karmakar provided the music. Bimal Das was in charge of lighting. A seminar on drama in the eastern zone was also organised when the play was staged.

At Jatni, I met Dillip Kumar Mitra and Sanatan Goswami, both lecturers in Bengali at Surendranath College near Sealdah. They came there as members of the panel of judges. When I was a member of the Executive Board of Sahitya Akademi, I had to go to Delhi frequently. Those days, one had to travel to Delhi via Calcutta. On my way to Delhi, I used to spend some time with Dillip babu and Sanatan babu. Dillip babu once arranged for me to meet the famous Bengali playwright,

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Manmathnath Ray in 1976. At this time Ray was very old and ailing. I met him at his residence in Vivekananda Road. He was very happy to see me, and presented me an autographed copy of his collected works.

Dillip babu was planning a book on world drama. He wanted to include in it a chapter on Modern Oriya plays. He had already collected from the National Library a lot of information on well-known Oriya playwrights. But he found it difficult to obtain information on younger dramatists in Orissa. I therefore sent him a list containing the names and addresses of young Oriya playwrights such as Bijay Mishra, Ratnakar Chaini and Kartik Rath. He put this information to good use in his book in Bengali entitled *Adhunika Biswa Natya Sahitya* (1977), which provided a basis for the comparative study of Oriya drama.

After the decay of the commercial stage in Orissa, a number of amateur theatre groups appeared on the scene and staged new-wave plays. Besides Srujani, Sanket and Friends' Union, groups such as Uttar Purush, Kalinga Kala Parishad, Rupakar, United Artists, Satabdira Kalakar, Bindu O Balaya, Kala Vikash Kendra kept drama alive in different parts of Orissa. Looking back, I feel that these groups overlooked the importance of maintaining continuity with the past. They avoided plays, which had been successfully staged in the past, as if, they had been rotten meat, thereby promoting a set of unhealthy attitudes. Some chose to put third-rate plays written in other languages on the stage, and felt very proud of what they did. However, this was not done anywhere else in the country. Theatre groups elsewhere, of course, staged new plays written in other languages. They also interpreted their old plays afresh and put them on stage. This enabled them to nurture a vital link with the past. However, some modern Oriya plays, which embodied a new consciousness, continued to appeal to the readers long after they were staged, on account of their literary worth.

Aranya Fasal was one such play, and it came to win the affection of its readers. I came to find out about this

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accidentally. I had once been invited to Balasore as the chief guest of a drama festival. I reached Balasore by train around 2 PM. Since I was terribly hungry I went to a hotel to have lunch. I went to the dining hall of the hotel, where I found five or six young men in the middle of having their lunch. The smell of sea fish blending with smell of rice and dal had filled the dining hall. I silently waited for them to finish eating their meal. I could overhear them talking about a certain young woman. One of them was telling the others of his love for her. Suddenly, they all burst out laughing when one of them remarked, "Why did you behave like the goat in *Aranya Fasal*?" I was taken aback. It amazed me that my use of the goat as a symbol of sexuality in *Aranya Fasal* had become part of everyday speech. I edged closer to them in order to be able to hear what they were talking about. This made them feel self-conscious. They hurriedly finished their meal and were going away, when one of them looked straight at me, and said, "Sir, please don't mind. If I am not wrong, you are..." I had nothing to say in reply. So I smiled. They apologized. But I told them that in fact I very much enjoyed what they said. From them I came to learn that some of the organisers waited for me since 10 A.M. in front of the hall, where the festival was to be held. They had just gone off to have their lunch. I was now escorted to the dak bungalow, where arrangements for my accommodation and boarding had been made. The young men seemed very pleased to have run into me by accident. I too had found the experience exceedingly agreeable.

Later, I came across Manohar Malgaonkar's article, "The Secret Wish of Authors,' which appeared in *The Statesman* on 12 March, 1996. In this, Malgaonkar said that the famous English novelist, Arnold Bennett used to carry a five-pound note in his pocket in the hope that he would give it to someone who would be spotted reading one of his novels. It seems this wish of his never came to be fulfilled. Whether this story was true or not is beside the point. But Malgaonkar was right when he said that all writers secretly wished to happen upon someone in the act of reading their works. My experience with the

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young men in the hotel had indeed brought me boundless pleasure.

Another unforgettable experience is associated with *Aranya Fasal.* While preparing the fourth volume of my collected plays, which included *Aranya Fasal,* my attention got riveted by a part of the closing section of the play. As I proofread the last scene of the play late at night, I felt a shiver run through me. It seemed to me as if I had come across a similar incident in some other book. Did I then borrow the incident from somewhere else? I tried hard to jog my memory. At long last, I remembered that the incident involving Sangram stabbing himself did bear an uncanny resemblance to the suicide of the famous Japanese novelist, Yukio Mishima.

Mishima had earned world-wide fame when still very young. Critics the world over were convinced that he would certainly receive the Nobel Prize. However, the award went to an older Japanese novelist, Yasunari Kawabata, for the jury felt that Mishima, who was only fortythree at the time, could wait.

Mishima's personality was a many-faceted one. He had formed a private army, which consisted of young men, who shared his right-wing political outlook. One day, a strange impulse took possession of him and he did something unbelievable.

Mishima, accompanied by three of the members of his private army, went to meet General Masihita in his room at the army head quarters. After exchanging greetings, he went and sat in a chair beside the one occupied by the General. When the General found that Mishima was carrying a sheathed sword, he asked if he was permitted to bring with him a weapon like that when he visited the army headquarters. Mishima said that he had a certificate permitting him to own an antique sword like this, which was used by soldiers in the days gone by. The General took the sword, felt its keen edge and then handed it back to Mishima saying, "I never knew private armies had such rare and excellent weapons in their possession."

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Now, Mishima's friends suddenly pounced on the General and tied him to his chair. When some army officers rushed into the room to come to the General's rescue, Mishima attacked them with his sword and repulsed them. He announced that if his demands were not met, he would behead the General and kill himself afterwards. The soldiers could have easily shot Mishima and his friends down; but the defence department advised the soldiers against killing a writer of Mishima's stature and urged them to deal with the situation with tact and caution.

Mishima demanded that all soldiers belonging to the eastern division be brought into the parade ground. In a short time, the ground filled with soldiers, reporters, non-military police, and T.V. cameramen. Planes flew low to take pictures of the strange goings on down below. Many were confused as to why Mishima was doing something so bizarre. What did he really want?

At midday, Mishima threw the door of the room open and came out. He was now in military uniform. He sported a headband bearing a picture of the rising sun.

During the Second World War America had dropped the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in Japan. This had led to the total defeat of the country. It was a terrible blow to Japan's pride. Japan's humiliation had deeply hurt young Mishima. Given his radical rightwing political creed, he believed that, if Japan was ever to regain its lost glory, it must bring back monarchy. For him, the army was the soul of Japan. He wanted that the army should rise in rebellion and reinstate the Emperor, who in the post-war world was not being shown the respect due to him. Mishima was scared that Japan would remain subjugated by western powers for a century. He wanted to remind the Japanese army of its historic responsibility through a dramatic act of supreme self-sacrifice. He looked down at the crowd, who had gathered below the balcony. Ordering them to become quiet, he delivered a brief but fiery speech. He said that he had thought the Jietai (the Japanese army) was the last hope of Nippon, the last strong hold

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

of Japanese soul. But he now found that the Japanese were obsessed with money; they were no longer possessed of a national spirit. The army, which was the soul of Japan, had betrayed it. He urged the soldiers to come forward and to protect Japan, "Our history, our culture, the Emperor."

Mishima asked if anyone would come and join him. He waited for a while, and said that he had realised that he had failed to rouse them, that he was utterly disillusioned with the army. Then he shouted 'Long live the Emperor' and went back to the room. There he took off his military uniform and committed harakiri by stabbing his abdomen with a sharp-edged knife. Before proceeding to the army headquarters, Mishima had left a note on his table, which said, "Human life is limited, but I would like to live for ever."

Whether Mishima's suicide made him live for ever was a different matter. But the similarity between his *harakiri* and Sangram's suicide in the last scene of *Aranya Fasal* alarmed me a great deal. Although Mishima and Sangram were very different in the way they looked at life, they resembled each other in the way they chose to die: they both committed suicide after delivering speeches aimed at awakening others. The locale of Mishima's *harakiri* resembled a stage setting. Just as his last speech was directed at the army gathered below the balcony, Sangram's speech was addressed to the audience assembled in the hall. If Sangram turned the stage into the theatre of real life in order to expose the hypocrisy and deception underlying modern life, Mishima turned the real-life context of the room at the army headquarters into a stage to convey what he believed was the truth. In both the cases the dividing line between life and theatre got blurred.

I wondered, nervously, if I had unconsciously borrowed the incident from the biography of Mishima! I took out the book from my bookshelf and checked if Mishima had committed *harakiri* before *Aranya Fasal* came to be written. If this had been the case, no one would have believed that I had not plagiarised the incident from the Mishima biography. I found that Mishima committed harakiri eleven months

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

after *Aranya Fasal* was published.

Although I now felt reassured, I kept wondering how life came to imitate art. A partial answer to my question came from my young friend, Arun Kumar Mohanty. He said that, when Dosteivsky's *Crime and Punishment* was in press, the author came to know that an incident similar to the one he had described in his novel had taken place.

After 'Srujani' ceased to exist and before I moved to Bhubaneswar, I wrote two plays: *Katha Ghoda* (The Wooden Horse), and *Urmi* (The Waves). The central idea of *Kathaghoda* came to me entirely by accident. One day, my wife told me of an educated, middle-class woman being stopped from committing suicide. The woman was taking the extreme step because she could not bear her husband's tyranny any more. This incident put me in the mind of another, which I had witnessed long ago.

When I was practicing law, I used to go to my senior, Pashayat babu's chamber in Telenga bazar every morning. One day, on my way there, I found a gentleman running away from home, screaming in terror. His wife, who wielded a broomstick, was chasing him. She went on landing blow after blow on her husband, unmindful of his shrieks. My imagination blended the two disparate yet in some ways similar incidents and created *Katha Ghoda*. The play came to be published in *Nabarabi* in 1972. *Nabarabi*, which was published every month from Calcutta, and was edited by Rabindra Kumar Parija, had a huge circulation. It had already eclipsed the popular Oriya monthly, *Asanta Kali*. Through *Nabarabi*, my play found its way to almost every corner of Orissa.

Katha Ghoda came to be staged in Puri by the Kumar Utsab Samiti. I was invited to see the play. When I arrived in Puri, the performance had already begun. The play was being staged in open air, like a *yatra*. A large crowd had gathered around the stage. It consisted mostly of young men from the slums, a few workers, rickshaw-pullers, shopkeepers and shop attendants. I stood in the midst and observed their response to the play. My friend, the poet and playwright, Harihar Mishra

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was playing the role of the central character in the play. The response of ordinary men and women to my play convinced me that day that my attempt at incorporating elements of folk theatre into new-wave theatre was not unsuccessful. My other play, *Urmi* was based on telepathy and was centred on the theme of love.

My winning the Akademi award for *Aranya Fasal* led to other achievements. In 1973, I received a letter from Dr Prabhakar Machwe, who was then Secretary, Sahitya Akademi. It informed me that I had been appointed a member of the general body of the Akademi. In the first meeting of the general body I got elected to the executive body of the Akademi.

In December, 1973 I was told that I had been appointed the Secretary of three akademies in Orissa: Sahitya Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, and Lalit Kala Akademi. At first I thought it was a rumour. Since the inception of these institutions, Orissa Government servants with artistic leanings used to be appointed as their secretaries. I was keen to find out if the news had any basis in truth. So I went to meet the Secretary, Department of Culture at his residence. The Secretary, Mr Heramba Narayan Das Mohapatra, a soft-spoken and good-looking man, said, when he saw me, "When are you going to join?" Orissa at the time had been placed under President's rule. So, the Secretary instead of the Minister was the president of the three akademies. Had a Minister been the President, a government servant would certainly have been chosen for the post. But, during President's rule, the decision to select someone for the post of Secretary of the akademies rested with Mr Satarwala, the Adviser to the Governor. He ticked my name in the list of the names of state and central government servants, which had been submitted to him. I asked Heramba babu why he did not find out if I was willing to accept the job or not. He simply said, "You must come." Although I was serving in the AIR on a contract basis, rules were changed in order to enable me to join as Secretary of these three akademies.

After I returned to Cuttack, I discussed with my family

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

members whether I should accept the new assignment. At first, I found it difficult to arrive at a decision. At night, while I lay half asleep, it seemed as if someone whispered into my ears "You did not angle for this job. Your destiny is leading you there. So you must face the challenge and leave the rest to the Almighty." I was reminded of the day when a conspiracy had forced me to leave Kujang, a place, which was so dear to me. On that day, I had looked up at the sky and prayed, "O Lord, may your will be done." Now my doubts vanished, and I made up my mind to leave for Bhubaneswar.

My younger brother Bibhuti, his children, my mother and my younger daughter, Sikata, stayed in Cuttack. My wife and my son, Punyasloka went to live with me in Bhubaneswar. I joined the akademies on 16 January 1974. I was at the time a member of the central Sahitya Akademi. I soon discovered how Orissa Sahitya Akademi differed from its counterpart in Delhi although they both had the same objectives.

The central Sahitya Akademi had been set up in March 1954 with the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru as its President. At its inaugural function, Dr Radhakrishnan, who was the Vice President of India at the time, said the following, explaining its objective: "It is the purpose of this Akademi to recognise men of achievement in letters, to encourage men of promise in letters, to educate public taste, and to improve standards of literature and literary criticism." (S. Radhakrishnan, 12 March 1954, *Three Decades: A Short History of Sahitya Akademi-1954-84*, SA Publication, 1985).

Akademies modelled on the central akademies soon came to be set up by state governments. Their constitutions were also modelled on that of the central ones. However, in case of the central Sahitya Adademi, the President was elected by the members of the General Body, while the Presidents of the state akademies were nominated by the state governments. The central Sahitya Akademi chooses its Secretary through its own selection process, whereas the Secretaries of the state akademies were appointed by state governments. As a result, state akademies are no better than government departments.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

However, I was determined to do something during my tenure of office. I ended up serving the three akademies for long six years. The period I spent as the Secretary of Orissa Sahitya Akademi was remarkably free of controversy.

However, a year or two after joining the Orissa Sahitya Akademi, I came to know that an eminent man in Orissa, who was a member of the Executive Committee, conspired to remove me from office. When the Minister for Culture, Gangadhar Mohapatra became the President of the Sahitya Akademi, he once called me and handed me a letter and asked me to go through it. The letter contained a venomous attack on me. The writer of the letter urged the Minister to throw me out because I belonged to the wrong caste. The Minister dismissed it as the outpourings of a mad man and asked me to file it, which meant not taking any notice of it. The member continued to harass me by opposing me unnecessarily and saying rude things about me at committee meetings. At times I protested. Although I had gone to the Akademi determined to do something, I sometimes felt fed up and wanted to return to the AIR. However, soon the situation changed dramatically.

On the day it happened, the Executive Committee held a meeting at 9 AM. Both the President and the Vice-President were absent; so the meeting was presided over by Professor Shriram Chandra Dash. Since the meeting started late, Professor Dash suggested that the deliberations begin after lunch. During lunch, the person, who had written that letter I have referred to, was in a jovial mood and exchanged jokes with me. I wondered how this change had come over him.

In the evening, I went to attend a film society function held at the Kasturba Nari Mahal. The Society was screening an old classic, *Joan of Arc*. In the dim light of the hall, a tall gentleman came and occupied a seat beside me. I asked him in a low voice, "Why are you late, Sir?" He whispered, "I had to finish something before coming here." The gentleman was none other than Mr Gian Chand, who had been sent as the Administrator of Utkal University, which had been superseded

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

by the Government. On that day he had taken steps to compulsorily retire the Professor, a member of Orissa Sahitya Akademi, who had written to the Minister against me, from service. This effectively severed the member's link with Orissa Sahitya Akademi.

After I came to work in Bhubaneswar, I went through many interesting new experiences. I quickly learnt the difference between serving under the central government and doing so under the state government. The most striking feature of bureaucracy in Orissa was the large-sized ego of its top officials. Since during my service career as a central government employee I had never encountered such egoism, I could observe how this expressed itself with the clarity available only to an outsider.

The new capital was built in Bhubaneswar according to a plan drawn up by the German architect Koenisberger. On 13 April 1948, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru laid the foundation stone of the new capital. Maybe, the goddess of fate planted an 'ego' tree for the top officials in Bhubaneswar on that very day. By the time I went to live there, the plant had grown into a large, spreading tree.

The Oriya poet, Guru Prasad Mohanty won the central Sahitya Akademi award in 1973. Since he could not go to Delhi to receive his award, a special function was arranged at Rabindra Mandap in Bhubaneswar by central Sahitya Akademi to give Sri Mohanty this award. I was asked to see to the arrangements for the function to be held at Bhubaneswar. I invited scholars, intellectuals and other distinguished people to this function. After the function came to a close, the officials of the Akademi, a few writers who had won the Akademi awards earlier, and members of the Advisory Board were invited on to the stage to be photographed with the winner of the Akademi Award.

However, the matter did not end here. The next day, as soon as I came to my office, I received a call from an IAS officer, who was closely associated with the Akademi. He called me over to his office. When I met him, he said, simmering

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

with rage, "You have insulted me." I was taken aback. He then told me that the night before, he, who was associated with the Culture Department, was not called on to the stage to be photographed while another IAS officer, who was his junior was invited. This he had found terribly humiliating. I explained that insulting him was not my intention at all. It had been decided that only persons formally associated with central Sahitya Akademi would be invited on to the stage for the group photograph. After my explanation, the fire of jealousy, conceit, the arrogance of power raging inside him abated somewhat. But it took a long time to die out completely.

On another occasion, I faced the wrath of another vindictive bureaucrat for no fault of mine. He was also an eminent writer. He continued to target me even after I left the Akademi. His literary talent in no way served to lessen his arrogance. He would talk sweetly to you, but would do you harm whenever an opportunity came his way. He operated through a small coterie, so as to be on the safe side. He was egoism incarnate. Spending a few years in Bhubaneswar gave me an opportunity to come across many such people, who seemed like characters in a play. Their real selves contrasted sharply with how they presented themselves to the world. This used to amuse me a great deal.

While working at the AIR, my field of activities was confined to Orissa. When I became a member of the General Body of central Sahitya Akademi, the field of my activities extended beyond Orissa. In 1993, I was again elected to the executive committee of central Sahitya Akademi for a term of five years. I was a member of the executive committee of central Sangeet Natak Akademi for a term of two years, from 1978 to 1980. I again served as a member of the general body of this Akademi from 1993 to 1998. I was also associated with the general body of the Lalit Kala Akademi as an ex-officio member for a few years.

Involvement with these institutions brought me in contact with many distinguished writers and artists in India. I visited several cities in the country, where meetings of the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Akademi or national seminars were held. As a member of the jury of the all-India radio play competition, and a member of the theatre expert committee of Sangeet Natak Akademi, I went to many places outside Orissa. I often had to make trips to Calcutta and Delhi.

During this period, I made friends with many writers and artists. I came close to the Kashmiri writer, Akhtar Mahiuddin, who invited me to visit Kashmir a number of times. But I could not go there. The eminent Manipuri writer, Dr Nilakantha Singh became a close friend of mine. He and I visited several cities in India together. I had two more friends in Manipur, who were famous theatre directors: Ratan Thiam and H. Kanhailal Singh. They had won great fame all over the country for using the martial art of Manipur in theatre. Some theatrical productions in Orissa came under their influence.

I once fell seriously ill in Delhi while attending the national theatre festival held under the auspices of central Sangeet Natak Akademi. I was then staying at the India International Centre. Gobardhan Panchal, the famous stage designer and K.N. Panikkar, the noted theatre director, were also staying there. They lovingly nursed me during my illness. I also grew close to Basant Bapat, the Marathi poet and Vijay Tendulkar, the Marathi dramatist. While in Bombay, I got an opportunity of watching Tendulkar's famous play, *Sakharam Binder*. The play had been directed by Satyadev Dubey. After the play, Dubey and I had a long talk about the play.

On another occasion, I once went to see Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal*, which was staged in Sanmukhanand Hall. The hall, which could seat three thousand spectators, was packed to capacity. I was accompanied by my son-in-law, Manas, who was in the army. People's love for theatre in Maharastra amazed him. Thousands of cars were parked in front of the hall. It took us nearly one hour to cross to the other side of the road.

Two other major figures in Indian theatre come to mind: B.V. Karanth and Habib Tanvir. Karanth's contribution to music and innovations in the field of stage direction is unforgettable.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

We became close friends. He was alone among Indian theatre directors who knew so many artists, young and old, in Orissa. He once came to Orissa, when I was Secretary, Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi. He wanted to have a darshan of Lord Jagannath in Puri, and to meet the President of the Akademi, Justice Harihar Mohapatra, who lived in Puri. It began raining when we started our journey. A storm gathered. But Karanth was determined to go. The storm was raging when we arrived in Puri, and it was dark on account of power failure. Inside Jagannath temple, everything was absolutely quiet. Only a few ghee-filled earthen lamps burned in front of the deities. Karanth was very happy. On our way back, he said, "To have gone back without having a darshan of the Lord would have left me terribly dissatisfied."

Habib Tanvir hailed from Chhatisgarh. He had set up Naya Theatre, taking into its fold rural artists. Here he used Chhatisgarh dialect in his plays. Naya Theatre became famous throughout the country. He was twice nominated to the Rajya Sabha. He was also a member of the central akademies. So I got an opportunity to work with him. At times, after akademi meetings, he took me to his South Avenue residence to let me see rehearsals of his plays. Once I spent a long time watching rehersals for his play *Charandaschor*. On my invitation Tanvir once came to Orissa. He organised a workshop involving artists of Ganjam district, who acted in *Prahlad Natak* and *Dwari Natak* Tanvir got these folk plays staged in Delhi.

Whenever I went to Delhi I used to meet the well-known art scholar, Dr Kapila Vatsayan. She seemed to know almost every actor, artist and singer in the country. She kept herself informed about the work they were doing. She often regretted that some playwrights and artists formed coteries and dominated the art and drama scene in the country with the help of national newspapers. She often succeeded in bringing neglected writers and artists to limelight. While in Delhi, I also often met Professor Nemichand Jain. He was an expert on theatre and edited the famous magazine, *Nataranga*. He loved me like his younger brother. I also used to meet the editor of

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Enact, Rajendra Paul in Delhi. English translations of regional plays were published in *Enact* and reached a wide readership. The English translation of my play, *Katha Ghoda* (The Wooden Horse), made by Prafulla Mohanty, was published in *Enact*. In Delhi, I made the acquaintance of Amrit Rai, son of Prem Chand the architect of modern Hindi literature. I often met the famous Hindi literary critic, Namvar Singh. He and I received the Sahitya Akademi award in the same year.

In Calcutta, which was closer home, I used to meet the poet Annada Sankar Ray. Whenever Kumar Ray, who was director of the theatre group 'Bahurupi', came to know I was in Calcutta, he would telephone me and invite me to see a play. I regularly called on the theatre critic, Samik Bandopadhyay, at his Golf Green residence. He was the President of Natya Shodh Sansthan. This was perhaps the only institution in all of India, which served as a theatre archive: Prativa Agrawal, an actress and theatre critic, was its director. I met her whenever I went to Calcutta. She also called on me whenever she came to Cuttack.

In 1978, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, the President of central Sangeet Natak Akademi, came to Bhubaneswar. She was an eminent freedom fighter. I arranged for her to meet some people during her stay here. Among those she met were the last representatives of the Mahari tradition, Harapriya Devadasi and Kokila Devadasi. She recorded a long interview with them. She was extremely fond of me. When I resigned from the central Sahitya Akademi, she wrote, "To me this was a great personal grief, for you had always been a source of knowledge and help."

The year I joined central Sahitya Akademi as a member of the executive body, I happened to attend a board meeting in Bombay. Arrangements for my accommodation were made by Bhubaneswar Mishra, who had joined Bibidha Bharati in Bombay, at Kashmir Hotel near Victoria Terminus, which was owned by an Oriya. Around the same time, a national literary seminar was also being held in Bombay, which was chaired by the famous actor and writer, Balraj Sahni. At this seminar,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

I presented a paper on the works of major Oriya writers. From the questions, which the participants from other regions asked me, it became clear that they had not heard of any Oriya writer except Fakir Mohan Senapati, Radhanath Ray, Gopinath Mohanty and Kalindi Charan Panigrahi. To me, this represented not their ignorance, but our inability to project ourselves. Later, my friend Dr H.K. Ranganathan presented me a copy of his book, *The Karnatak Theatre* in Bangalore. He said, "Send me a book in English or in Hindi on Oriya theatre." I kept quiet. A book in English or in Hindi on Oriya theatre has not been published yet.

Memories of my activities outside Orissa brought me back to the realities of life in the ego-dominated world of Bhubaneswar. But there are some who were gentle, decent and helpful. The poet, Sitakant Mahapatra was one of them.

I came to know Sitakant in the mid-1960s. Gopinath Mohanty was his close relation. Sitakant came to see me at my residence. I was suffering from mild fever and was giving finishing touches to my play *Urmi,* when I noticed him entering my room. As I raised my face from the manuscript, I saw him greeting me with a smile. He said, "I've come to Cuttack on some work. I heard that you're not keeping well. So I thought I must come and see you." His concern for a writer like me touched me deeply. This young bureaucrat was already an established poet. A couple of his poetry collections had been published. His warmth drew me towards him. Our relationship grew closer in the days to follow. He wrote to me regularly. We felt relaxed and comfortable with each other.

My relationship with another person was equally intimate. He was Professor Sisir Kumar Das, whom I met for the first time at Bhanja Kala Mandap, Bhubaneswar on the occasion of the Sarala Award ceremony on 14th June 1992. Professor Das of the Comparative Indian Literature Department, Delhi University graced the function as Chief Guest. His address, which was clear, lucid and scholarly, deeply impressed me.

After the meeting was over, we proceeded to Swosti

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Hotel, where dinner had been arranged for us. There I got an opportunity to introduce myself and Kishori Charan Das, the noted Oriya short story writer, to Professor Das. He said that he had read my play *Aranya Fasal*, in Oriya and also in English translation. Professor Das was a critic and essayist. He had also written plays in Bengali. I heard that his recent play, *Shyama* had been produced by 'Bahurupi' in Calcutta. When I asked him how he liked the production he said that he had not yet seen it on stage. I said that I would shortly go to Calcutta. He said, "Please see the play when you go there."

My relationship with Professor Das grew closer in course of time. Those days I used to go to Calcutta frequently. Both my daughters stayed there. My eldest son-in-law, Manas, who was a colonel in the Army, lived in the Fort William campus. And my youngest son-in-law, Ramakant, who worked in a bank, lived in Tollygunj.

The headquarters of the Eastern Command, officers' residences and barracks for soldiers were located on the Fort William campus, which was spread over an area of 177.42 acres. The fort was built in 1757 AD at Gobindpur on the banks of the Ganges at the instance of Clive. The fort had been built at a cost of 2 million pounds. Although new structures had been added in course of time, the old building still stands as a historical monument. My daughter Sabita and her husband, Manas were staying on the first floor of a building opposite the church of the company days, which stood at the centre of the campus. I liked the clean surroundings, and the silence, which prevailed there.

Towards the end of the month I visited Calcutta. I contacted my friend, Kumar Ray, the Director of 'Bahurupi'. He was glad to learn that I had met Professor Sisir Kumar Das in Bhubaneswar. He invited me to come to the Akademi of Fine Arts hall to see *Shyama* on stage. I went to the theatre, accompanied by Ramakant. The theme of the play was the same as Rabindranath Tagore's dance-drama, *Shyama*. But the interpretation was different. The characters were lively and the production was excellent. I was deeply impressed.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

I wrote a letter to Professor Das, congratulating him for the stage success of *Shyama*. He wrote back, saying, "I am one of your admirers. I know you through your writings long before I had the pleasant surprise of meeting you in person."

After this, we met several times in Delhi, especially at central Sahitya Akademi functions. I had read a few of his essays and heard a few of his lectures. His book, *A History of Indian Literature*, written in two parts, is an outstanding work of scholarship.

One day, I received a parcel containing a Bengali play, *Bagha* (Tiger: 1996). In fact, I had opened the packet several days after it reached me, because I was ailing when it arrived. As I glanced through the pages, I noticed that the play had been dedicated to me. This pleasant surprise deeply moved me. I felt overwhelmed.

The last play I wrote before I shifted to Bhubaneswar was *Urmi*. I wrote it in 1973. 'Yatri' of Bhubaneswar staged it at a drama festival organised by Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi at Balasore. Akshay Mohanty (Kashyap) had directed the play.

The central character of the play, Debakant Malhotra, had been modelled on one Mr Malhotra alias Mr Chatterjee, whom I had met at Basu Boarding House in Delhi. The boarding house in Gole Market area was a favourite haunt of Bengali, Oriya and Assamese visitors, who preferred the Bengali dishes served there to the usual Punjabi dishes on offer in most other hotels. I used to stay in that boarding house during my visits to Delhi. Once, while staying there, I came to know that a conflict broke out between Bengalis and Oriyas. It had erupted from a minor incident and had subsequently taken a violent turn. I did not consider it safe to take a train to Orissa, because it had to pass through West Bengal. I had to postpone my return trip and stayed in the boarding house. Since I was the only Oriya boarder there, I was also a little apprehensive. Mr Debakanta Malhotra alias Chatterjee was also staying there at the moment. This fair and handsome gentleman was amiable and talkative by nature. He used to travel a lot. A leather suitcase and a briefcase were all the luggage he had. No one knew

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

for sure what he actually did for a living. Some said he was a prosperous businessman, others thought, he was a factory owner. Some others believed, he was a geologist or an engineer. His forefathers were Chatterjees and now they were Malhotras. He would explain, "What's there in a name? What difference does it make whether it is Malhotra or Chatterjee? Be human and cut out all this nonsense."

He would often invite all the boarders to a dinner. "I invite all of you to dinner this evening. I've told the Manager, it would be charged to my account."

When I was thinking about the Oriya-Bengali conflict and the postponement of my return trip to Orissa, Mr Malhotra entered my room, two cups of tea in hand. He held out a cup to me and said, "I heard from the Manager that you are worried. You want to return to Cuttack. We won't allow you to travel in train in the prevailing situation. Why do you want to take a risk? Grown homesick? Need money? How much? No problem. How much?" I could not give him a reply. But he continued to reassure me. He put forward a strange proposal to quell the violence: "Let there be an agreement between the two Chief Ministers, Siddhartha Sankar Ray and Nandini Satpathy. Let all the eligible young men of West Bengal marry the young women of Orissa and all the eligible young men of Orissa should marry the young women of West Bengal. All such marriages be solemnized at government expense. This would resolve the Bengali-Oriya conflict for all times to come."

I was now drawn into the conversation. I said, "Perhaps I shall never meet another person like you." "Perhaps never," he said. My interest in him grew. I said, "What about your family? Mrs Malhotra and children?" Suddenly his face turned pale. The happy-go-lucky person now looked very sad. He did not want to answer my question. "Please let's not talk about it," he said. He lit a cigarette and left the room. I could sense the pain in his heart. The anguish of Debakant Malhotra, the central character of *Urmi*, and his relationship with Alaka Nanda form the theme of my play.

My next play, *Sabdalipi* (A Game of Words) was written

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

in 1975. By this time I had shifted to Bhubaneswar and was staying in the quarters adjacent to the school for deaf, dumb and blind students, near Capital High School. Bipin Das, MLA was my neighbour, when I first came to stay in this house. Later, Shriballav Panigrahi, former minister, occupied the same quarters. His wife Sunanda was the daughter of the well-known exponent of Odissi music, Nilamadhab Panigrahi. My relationship with the Panigrahi family grew close during my stay there.

The Bhubaneswar residence brought an element of freshness to my life. Often on a Sunday or on a holiday, I would call the students of the Blind School, who lived on the other side of the barbed wire fence. They would talk to me and tell me about the Braille method of learning. They would also explain to me how the different letters could be expressed through sign language.

I planned to write a new play, which could express the anguish of a man whose words failed to express his suffering. Words had been created thousands of years ago to express the feelings of men and women living in society. Individual and social consciousness underwent a change and the same words with their conventional meanings failed to express the feelings of the modern man. The play *Sabdalipi*, based on this theme, was published in the Puja issue of *Nabarabi* (1975). It was staged by Sthiti-Maitri group of Puri and was directed by Radhakrushna Mohapatra. The International Theatre group in Bhubaneswar and Delhi staged the Hindi translation of the play under Gobind Gupta's direction. Its Bengali translation was produced by Theatre Centre, Calcutta, and the show ran on a commercial basis. The play drew favourable reviews in several prestigious journals, newspapers and books including *Indian Literature, Enact, The Hindustan Standard* and *Comparative Indian Literature*.

I served the state Akademi for six years. The six years I spent in Bhubaneswar was a period of sterility as far as my writing life was concerned. After I wrote *Sabdalipi*, for four long years I could not venture to start a new play. I lost myself

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

in a morass of files, and was busy organising meetings and carrying out directives.

The urge to write a new play came over me almost every two years. This urge gripped me three years after I wrote *Sabdalipi*. Meanwhile, the theatre world in Cuttack and Bhubaneswar had changed.

By this time, Bhubaneswar had come to play a more important role as a centre of theatrical activities. Out of the three halls in Cuttack, two—Janata and Kalashree—had wound up. A few young men, under the leadership of Rabi Parija, had taken over the charge of the Annapurna B group. Occasionally, they staged plays there. At times, amateur groups took the hall on rent. The condition of the hall was awful. The wings were tattered; the curtains were worn-out. A few broken chairs and a few tin chairs had been brought over from a tent house. The ceiling had caved in and had to be removed; the rafters overhead resembled the rib-cage of a skeleton. Pigeons entered the hall through the broken skylights.

Under the circumstances, the centre of theatrical activities in Orissa shifted to Bhubaneswar. There were at least three halls there—Kala Mandap in the Museum premises, Rabindra Bhavan, and Soochana Bhavan. And, of course, a number of open spaces where make-shift stages could be constructed.

When I decided to leave Bhubaneswar, I had a feeling that I should write a new play, which should be staged there. *Klanta Prajapati* (The Tired Butterfly) was born out of my intense desire to write a new play. I prepared the final draft in 1979, the last year of my stay in Bhubaneswar.

Three years before I wrote the play, I had gone to Trichur, Kerala. While there, I visited the famous Urubhaya Vishnu temple. I had also visited Trivandrum and Kanyakumari. I stayed for a few days at Kovalam.

I had been enthralled by the beauty of Kanyakumari, where I spent a couple of days. The Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea meet the Indian Ocean there. People gathered in large numbers near the temple at Kanyakumari.

A Manipuri couple accompanied me to Kanyakumari.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

One morning we went to the beach to watch the sunrise. I waited there for the couple, who had gone to take a bath in the sea. After a while they came back, carrying their wet clothes in a bag. The face of my friend's wife glowed in the sun. She suggested, "Come, Das sahib, please buy us conch shells." Shops in the lanes and by-lanes of the shore, which sold conch shells, had opened by that time. After searching for a conch shell of the right size, and after a lot of bargaining, I got one famous *dakshinabarta* conch, which I gave to my friend's wife. She was delighted. I said to her, "Why only a conch? And this *dakshinabarta* one?"

She smiled and said in broken Hindi, "I shall take a vow."

"I did not follow you," I said.

She explained, "The vow to remain pure."

Still I could not follow her.

She continued, "We don't get conch shells, which we consider especially sacred, in Manipur. A *dakshinabarta* conch is considered more sacred than an ordinary one."

Her husband explained it to me in English, "We consider it a symbol of purity." She handed me the conch saying, "Try to feel it."

I held it in both my hands. A strange feeling passed through my body and entered my mind and heart. I was thrilled. I suggested, "Let's return to the hotel."

This experience had found its way to the play, *Klanta Prajapati*. The conch had become a symbol of purity and holiness. In the last scene of play, while leaving the house of Rashmi, the protagonist Anupam blows the conch-shell. He does so while reciting from the *Gita* to reaffirm its values.

It was decided that the theatre group, 'Ebam Ame' would stage the play in Bhubaneswar. Asim Basu, Bhagaban Nayak Burma and Bijoy Mishra urged me from time to time to prepare the script. It was staged at Rabindra Mandap a few days after I left Bhubaneswar. Those who acted in the play included Ramakant Mohapatra, Bhaskar Muduli, Chakradhar Das, Shanti Padhi and Bidyutlata Devi. Santanu Mahapatra set its music.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

In Cuttack, I always remembered those in Bhubaneswar, who were associated with the stage. The painter Asim Basu, who was also a director, was known for his patience and dedication. He was the architect of stagecraft in Bhubaneswar. He was associated with a number of productions in the city.

With the production of *Klanta Prajapati* at Rabindra Madap, the desire to get a play staged in Bhubaneswar was fulfilled. However, staging it in Cuttack proved difficult. It was not easy to produce a play, if one did not have any direct contact with a theatre group. Now I was not in touch with any group in Cuttack. The play got a new life after it was translated into Hindi by Banamali Das. Sahitya Akademi's Hindi bi-monthly, *Samakalin Bharatiya Sahitya* carried the translation under the title "Ek Anupam Yatra Par." The play also appeared in book-form.

I experienced the pleasure of homecoming when I came back to Cuttack. But it took time to readjust myself to this city. I had grown fond of Bhubaneswar during the few years of my stay there. So the change of place affected me to a certain extent. Hooligans had come to dominate life in Cuttack and their importance in politics had also increased.

I started rewriting the radio-play *Bitarkita Aparahna* for the stage. It was scheduled to be produced by the theatre group Sangeeta at Jatni, under the direction of Gopal Dey. The play related to an incident, which took place at Kujang around 1950. News spread that the gold idol of Kanak Durga, which was worshipped in the household of an aristocratic family, had been stolen. Since people reposed firm faith in the goddess, the incident of theft upset them terribly. A rumour had also spread that the idol would never be recovered. One member of the family, who was a follower of a particular political party, had sold the idol to get money for the party fund.

I had never tried to investigate into the matter and ascertain the truth. But the incident had left a lasting impression on my mind. I came to feel acutely the generation-gap that was now visible in society. *Bitarkita Aparahna* was written against

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

this background. The play was staged at Rabindra Mandap in 1980.

The play brings out the inherent conflict between the good and the evil in an individual. I had attempted to present the conflict in a different locale in the one-act-play, *Sandhan* (The Quest). The fact that I tried to present the idea in the form of a full-length play gave me much satisfaction.

The 1980s were crowded with events. I returned to Cuttack in January 1980. I took retirement from the All India Radio in December 1982. The next year, I was awarded a Senior Fellowship to carry out research in drama and to write new plays. I had received much encouragement from Dr Kapila Vatsyan. The same year, I had been selected to travel to Bulgaria, Poland and the USSR, under the cultural exchange programme of Government of India. The next year, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting selected me as a Producer Emeritus in Drama.

I had always nursed the desire to write a play in which a legend or a historical event could be interpreted through the medium of a modern play. I thought that the legend of Nandika Keshari would serve my purpose. About thirty years ago, I had also started writing a play based on the theme. But somehow I was not satisfied with the outcome. Now I thought of striking a balance between folk form and the forms of a modern play. I also hoped that it would succeed on the stage.

The form of folk drama which I employed in two of my plays, *Amrutasya Putrah* and *Katha Ghoda*, was confined to *yatra*. I wanted to move a step further. I decided to employ several elements of folk drama in my new play. However, I could not start working on the play for a long time. The idea, which lay dormant in my mind, got revitalised during my visit to the East European countries.

An interesting incident took place in the Polish capital, Warsaw. The representative of a cultural magazine recorded an interview with me. He wanted to find out if I had written any play, which contained a message of peace to the people of the strife-torn world, which was facing a nuclear holocaust. I

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

told him about my short play *Atimanab,* which I wrote long back, in 1961. I also told him that I was going to write a play, *Nandika Keshari,* in which the heroine would sacrifice her life for the sake of peace.

I started redrafting the play *Nandika Keshari* in January 1984 and completed it in a month's time. It had been decided that the theatre group, Abhinay of Bhubaneswar would stage the play. Ananta Mohapatra, who had kept himself away from directing plays for a long time, agreed to direct it at my request. Finally, the play was put up at Rabindra Mandap in January 1985. After the performance was over, I returned to my residence at Cuttack and wrote in my diary: "At last *Nandika Keshari* was reborn on stage."

Two small incidents, which took place after the play had been written—and the book was published in 1985—remained indelibly etched in my memory.

I had just finished writing the script. I was returning by bus from Bhubaneswar to Cuttack. Debi Prasanna Patnaik, who was the Director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore boarded the bus at Vani Vihar square. The seat next to me lay vaccant. I requested him to occupy it. When I told him that I had completed the script of *Nandika Keshari,* he said that many others had written plays on the same theme. I said, "Yes, Bhikari Chanran Patnaik and many others had written plays on the same subject. But in my play, I have tried to recreate the legend by giving it a new interpretation. I have attempted to employ some powerful theatrical devices of folk drama in my play."

Debi accompanied me to my house and offered to go through the play. We started reading the script and continued till about half-past three. We had forgotten all about lunch. Since he was the first person whom I read out the play, I wanted to know his reaction. After I completed reading, I looked at Debi's face and asked, "How is the play?"

He said, "Excellent."

Another interesting incident took place a few days after *Nandika Keshari* was published. One evening, I received a

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

telephone call from my journalist friend, Gorachand Mishra, who was then working for the Oriya daily, the *Prajatantra*. He said that he read the book in the newspaper office that evening. Once he started reading the play, he could not put it down; he had to finish it. He told me that it was Mahtab babu, who suggested that he should read it.

These two incidents gave me much satisfaction. Newspapers carried favourable reviews after the play was performed. In 1989, I received the prestigious Sarala Award for my play, *Nandika Keshari*. That year the award was given jointly to Dr Pratibha Ray and me.

The Sarala Award is given by the IMFA Public Charitable Trust for the best original work in Oriya. The award has been instituted by the industrialist, Bansidhar Panda and his wife, Ila Panda. The award giving ceremony was held in June 1990. His Excellency Governor of Orissa, Jagnyadutta Sharma inaugurated the function. The eminent Marathi writer, Gangadhar Gopal Gadgil was the Chief Speaker on the occasion.

I was not happy; nevertheless I accepted the award. Was my accepting the award a way of smothering the voice of conscience in the name of courtesy and humility? I could never arrive at a satisfying answer.

Towards the end of the nineties, I wrote *Nandika Keshari*. Although a collection entitled *Bichitramanara Natak* (plays produced from a strange mind) came out after this, it contained plays, which were written earlier than *Nandika Keshari*.

Some past incidents kept intriguing me. They could not be easily explained away through logic. That they contained hints of things to come, I could not bring myself to disbelieve. Subsequent events bore them out. One such incident happened way back in 1972.

That year, I was spending a few days in Delhi with my wife. We were staying at the residence of Arun Das, a painter who later settled in the USA. While there, I came to know that Satya Sai Baba was staying in the neighbourhood. Of him I knew very little. Some spoke of his miraculous powers; other disputed these claims. I had no opinion on the matter. An

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

invisible power now seemed to pull me towards him. At any rate, I did not want to miss an opportunity of seeing him when he was so near.

One day we went to see him. The roads leading to where he stayed overflowed with his devotees. When at last we reached the place of his residence, we were told that he had suddenly left for Jammu. We asked someone when the Baba would come back, "Only He knows," he said. The answer left us feeling discouraged. We came back home.

An opportunity to see Satya Sai Baba came to me in March 1973, when I went to Bombay to attend a Sahitya Akademi meeting. I went to Bandra to meet my wife's sister, Sheela and her husband. There I found that most of the flats were locked. Sheela told me that the occupants of all these flats had gone off to Andheri to have a *darshan* of Satya Sai Baba. From Sheela's place we went to the residence of Pramod Pati, who played a key role in introducing cartoon films in India. He said that we should go to the Mahakali temple, which was some ten kilometers from Andheri station, early in the morning, if we wanted to have a *darshan* of the Baba.

Bhubaneswar Mishra and I woke up at 3 AM and set off for Andheri. We reached there around 5 AM. But we found it extremely difficult to get a taxi, which would take us to Mahakali temple. After a great deal of persuasion a taxi-driver agreed to drive us there. The temple stood on one end of a flat field, which stretched from the middle of a hillside. One approached the temple by climbing stone steps cut into the hillside. At the foot of the hill were parked Fiat taxis out of number. They looked like hundreds of thousands of sea turtles lying side by side on a beach. The sight was an unforgettable one.

I asked one of the devotees waiting for a *darshan* of the Baba, "Will the Baba appear before his devotees today?" He said, "No one can predict Baba's ways. He came out early yesterday. Someone threw something at him. So he went back." I wondered if I would ever get a chance to have a glimpse of the Baba. I began to feel guilty for having dragged Bhubaneswar babu along, who had a meeting at 12 O'clock.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Suddenly there was a bustle. I saw Satya Sai Baba emerge from the temple and proceed down the carpeted corridor, flanked by countless devotees. He suddenly came in our direction and got so close that I could even hold his right hand for a moment. He had raised it to bless us. An inexplicable joy pervaded my being. Then he moved on.

Now we were worried about going back. No taxi was available. Suddenly a white car pulled up beside us. A middle-aged man was sitting at the driving seat. He stuck his neck out and asked, "Where do you want to go?" We said, "Marine Line Station." He opened the car door, and asked us to get in. He drove us up to Dadar Station and said, "You can take a train from here." Bhubaneswar babu managed reach Bibidh Bharati station before the meeting.

Who was the driver who drove us down to Mahakali temple? Why did Satya Sai Baba come to us, of all people? Who was the gentleman who gave us a ride to Dadar? I did not find it easy to answer these questions. Did these incidents reveal Satya Sai Baba's mysterious will?

The four years following my meeting with Satya Sai Baba was a time of discoveries, and revelations. Many memorable incidents took place in this period. Soon after my trip to Bombay, I went to Bangalore, where I read a paper entitled, "In search of New Theatre" at a seminar organised by the central Sangeet Natak Akademi.

From Bangalore I came to Pondicherry. I liked the place. I could sense there the presence of a mysterious and suprahuman power. In the middle of the Ashram stood a flowering tree called 'service'. The graves of Sri Aurobindo and Sri Maa lay under this tree. Once when I was deep in prayer under this tree, a flower fell on my head. It sent an electric wave through my body. The memory stayed with me for a long time.

The same year, I visited Vizag. My son-in-law Manas served here. His friend Binay, a Naval officer, invited me to spend a day in an engineering ship called INS Amba. I was also taken inside a submarine.

Soon afterwards, I went to Udaipur in Rajasthan, to take

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

part in a meeting of secretaries of state Akademies. At Udaipur, my host was Debilal Samar, who was the founder of a puppet dance training centre called 'Lok Kala Mandal.' Samar had received training from the famous puppetry expert, Obtratsov in Russia. He was a Jain. Staying with him gave me an opportunity to observe a Jain family from close quarters. Here non-violence was no empty slogan, but a way of life. Elderly Jains kept their mouths covered to keep insects from entering them. The Jains do not eat at night.

Samar's palatial house stood at the edge of the famous Nehru Lake in Udaipur. I stayed here. Every day, after having dinner before dark, I would discuss with him matters relating to art and culture of India. One day, we tried to find out why institutions of art and culture collapsed in India so soon after they were set up. Even institutions fully funded by the government, and government departments of culture failed to deliver the goods. Samar's answer to this was a pithy one, "This happens because the right persons are not given the job of managing these." Later, he elaborated on this statement: "It would not do if the person at the helm of affairs in these institutions is an administrator or an organiser. It will also not do if he happens to be a great artist, writer or scholar. The ideal chief should be able to combine the qualities of the two. Until such people are identified and placed in charge of these institutions, things will never improve." He was absolutely right. His remark was particularly applicable to the situation in Orissa. Here, civil servants who had nothing to do with art or culture were made the chiefs of cultural institutions. Sometimes, writers and artists, who were close to the seats of power but who had no administrative experience, were imposed on these institutions. As a result, these institutions got paralysed.

Travel served to broaden my mental horizon. In March 1977, I made a trip to Ahmedabad. While there, I visited Gandhi's Ashram at Sabarmati. Exactly 47 years ago, in March 1930, Gandhi had started his famous salt March to Dandi from here. He had covered a distance of 241 miles on foot and on 6 April, he picked up a handful of salt on the shores of the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Arabian Sea. The next year, he went to London to take part in the Round Table Conference and returned from there terribly disappointed. The recording company, His Master's Voice, brought out a disc which played the following song: "What a farce the Round Table Conference was ! Old Gandhi came back weeping."

While in Ahmedabad, I had the opportunity of spending a day at the residence of Uma Shankar Joshi, who later became President, central Sahitya Akademi. At his residence, I formed a clear idea of the domestic life of Gujaratis. For them, sitting on a swing and talking was a mark of status. One found a swing in every Gujarati house, in the drawing room, on the verandah, or on the terrace. I was accompanied by Dr R.S. Kelkar, who was Secretary of Sahitya Akademi. Gujarati writers organised a reception in our honour. There I learnt that, in Gujarat, plays were staged all over the state after they got published. The situation in Orissa was different: Unless a play first got staged, it had little chance of finding its way into print. People in Gujarat bought plays just as they bought novels or short stories.

In April 1977, I went to Bangalore, to be present at the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Kannada Sahitya Parishad. What happened at the inaugural function of the Diamond Jubilee left a deep impression on my mind. Nearly fifteen thousand chairs had been set out in front of a large pandal. The photographs of Kannada writers hung at different places. I occupied a seat in the second row and waited for the function to begin. The place was packed with people. Suddenly, several conches were blown. All eyes were now drawn to the decorated gateway. An old man walked slowly towards the pandal. He was wearing an embroidered Karnataki turban. A long scarf hung from his neck and almost touched his feet. A hush descended on the audience. Everyone rose to their feet to pay their respects to this gentleman. I wondered if he was the Governor of Karnataka. But there was no ADC accompanying him. It took him quite a while to reach the seat set apart for him. I asked a Kannada writer sitting next to me, "Who is

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this old gentleman?" He was taken aback. Then he replied, "Oh, he is our Bendre." I could sense his pride in acknowledging Bendre as 'their' writer.

Only three years before, in 1974, the Jnanapith award had been awarded jointly to Bendre (1896-1981) and the Oriya novelist, Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1991). I had a first-hand experience of the kind of respect, which the people of Karnataka showed to their authors. They were immensely proud of their writers.

Three years after my trip to Bangalore, in 1980, I returned to Cuttack after my tenure as the Secretary of the three state Akademies came to an end. As was the custom, I paid a courtesy call to a few officers in the Department of Culture. I spent quite a while talking to one of them in his office room. When I rose to take leave of him, he said, "Who is coming in your place as Secretary, Orissa Sahitya Akademi?" I said, "I have no idea." He said, "How about giving the job to Gopinath Mohanty?" The suggestion stunned me. "What are you saying?" I asked. He went on to explain unperturbed, "He has nothing on his hands now. It'd be nice if he came to the Akademi." I was left speechless when I discovered how a bureaucrat in the Department of Culture looked upon a writer of Gopinath Mohanty's stature. I sat back in the chair I had just got up from, and said, "Something just crossed my mind. So I thought I should tell you about it." Then I narrated to him the incident I was a witness to at the Diamond Jubilee celebrations in Bangalore. I closed by saying, "This is how the people of Karnataka treat a Jnanapith award winning Kannada writer. And you, who is a high-ranking official in the Department, feel that, since Gopinath Mohanty has nothing to keep him busy at the moment, he should be given a job out of pity. This is our misfortune." During my six-year stay at Bhubaneswar, I had noticed in ministers and bureaucrats an utter contempt for literature, art, and culture.

The year 1977 remained etched in my mind for a special reason. A meeting of the Executive Board of the Akademi was to be held on 9 December, where a decision was to be taken as

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

to finalise the Akademi awards for the year. The books shortlisted for the award included Kali Charan Patnaik's *Kumbhara Chaka* (The Potter's Wheel). I was a permanent member of the jury. According to rules in force at the time, the three members of the jury sent their choices separately in sealed envelopes. These were opened at the executive committee meeting. If no clear winner emerged, a book was chosen for the award, taking the opinion of the permanent member of the jury into account. Alternatively, none of the books in a particular language recommended were considered for the award.

In my opinion, Kali Charan Patnaik's *Kumbhar Chaka* demonstrated how Oriya language can be rendered powerful and evocative by using purely colloquial Oriya words and expressions. Like Fakir Mohan and Gopinath Mohanty, Kali Charan was a pioneer in this regard. However, Kali Charan's book presented a few problems: It contained uncharitable remarks on some stage artists, who had worked with the Orissa Theatres. Whether these remarks were based on truth was another matter, but there was the possibilility that the book might be denied the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award on account of these offensive remarks. So I thought my presence at the meeting was crucial to ensure that the book did not miss the award, for I suspected that, if Kali Charan did not win the award this time, he would never get it during his life-time.

A pillar has been erected in the centre of Paris in honour of the great French dramatist, Moliere. The inscription on it says: 'By not honouring you during your life time, the French have brought dishonour on themselves.' I am sure, had we failed to honour Kali Charan Patnaik while he was alive, future generations would have never forgiven us.

I was therefore determined that I must on no account miss this meeting of the executive committee. Two weeks before the meeting, I called on Kali babu at his Jagannath Ballav residence and said, "On 9 December, please pray to Lord Jagannath." "I pray to him every day," he said, smiling. I said, "Please pray to him with a little more fervour that day." A

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

little confused, Kali babu said, "All right. I will."

On 3 December, I saw a strange dream. Although we had left Kujang long ago in great bitterness, there were two things about the place I could never put out of my mind: the memories associated with Kujang, and my devotion to Lord Raghunath, in whose presence the prediction regarding my birth had been made by the astrologer. In my dream I saw that the idol of Lord Raghunath broke in two and became whole again. When I woke up I found myself trembling. Why did the idol break in two? Was it an ill omen? The question kept oppressing me. My wife comforted me saying it was only a dream after all. But I could not take it lightly. I had received the Sahitya Akademi award for *Aranya Fasal* after seeing milk dropping from a cow's udder and an elephant in a dream. Why should then this dream be dismissed as nothing but a dream? The idea took such a firm hold on my mind that I began talking about it to everyone around.

I told my colleagues Dhiren Patnaik, Dhiren Das, and Jagdish Kanungo that I was going to meet with an accident shortly. I asked the head assistant of my office to get the backlog of work cleared for I might not survive the accident I was going to meet with.

I had already booked an air ticket before I saw the dream. As the day of my departure for Delhi drew nearer, I felt apprehensive that I might die in a plane crash. My wife tried to persuade me not to travel by air, even to cancel my trip to Delhi. But I did not change my travel plans.

At last the day of my departure for Delhi arrived. Those days a small plane used to fly to Calcutta from Bhubaneswar at 4 P.M. From Calcutta one boarded a Boeing, which flew to Delhi. One arrived in Delhi at 8 P.M.

When my driver Gunakar came to drive me to the airport I told him jokingly, "Gunakar, my plane will crash. When you get the news you will come and take my wife and my son to my son-in-law's house, and from there drive them to Cuttack."

My wife was shocked by this joke. Her face fell. I tried to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

cheer her up saying that if I were destined to die of an accident, I would meet that accident while in Bhubaneswar. I told her that she should not worry, for the Almighty would look after me.

Our flight was delayed. It was 10.30 P.M. when the plane landed at Palam airport. My friend, Gobind Gupta, received me. We had coffee near the enquiry counter. Delhi was terribly cold at this time of the year. Mr Gupta offered to give me a ride on his scooter to Basu Boarding, where I was going to put up during my stay in Delhi. I said that I would go to Connaught Circus by bus, and go to Basu Boarding from there by an autorickshaw. That was what I did. At 11.30 P.M. I got down at the Indian Airlines office at Connaught Place.

Two to three autorickshaws approached me. I occupied one and said, "Gole Market." The driver did not want to go to a place, which was so near.

A gentleman, who wanted to go to Karolbagh, came. The driver now agreed to go, because he got two passengers. He would drop me at Gole Market and then proceed to Karolbagh.

The autorickshaw speeded along the road. It negotiated the outer circle of Connaught Circus, passed the Parliament Street, Regal Talkies, Khadi Bhandar. The road was deserted. The auto took a short-cut opposite Hanuman Temple to Gole Market. I noticed a bus rushing from the left side. The bus and the autorickshaw came dangerously close to each other. I screamed. After that everything was a blank.

When I came to, I found myself sitting in a taxi. There were a few people sitting inside the taxi. They offered me a cup of coffee, saying, "Please take it. You'll feel better." It was three O'clock in the morning. A thin layer of mist reduced visibility. The roads were empty. I took a few sips. My head reeled. I could only mumble, "Orissa Bhavan, Chanakyapuri." I felt drowsy and fell unconscious.

The taxi ran to Chanakyapuri, and pulled up in front of Orissa Bhavan. They opened the gate and carried me to the door. As they pressed the doorbell, the butler Lobo came out. He was surprised to see me accompanied by so many people.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

He said, "So late in the night... and you don't have reservation." By that time I was slowly re-gaining consciousness. I said, "I met with an accident. Please give me a glass of water." I felt a little better after I took water. I said to Lobo, "A room has been reserved for me in Basu Boarding House at Gole Market."

My head ached severely. Although I could not remember everything, I could muster just enough strength to stand up. The people, who had brought me to Orissa Bhavan, now took me to Basu Boarding House. On the way, they told me that they saw me lying unconscious on the roadside, when they returned after seeing the second show in a cinema. They saw a broken autorickshaw, a suitcase and a cap lying nearby. They knew it was an accident. They did not want to leave me lying there unattended. The man who accompanies the victim of an accident either to a hospital or to a police station always runs the risk of getting harassed by the police. Since I did not bear any visible mark of a wound and I was trying to speak, they thought that I would tell them my address, where they could leave me. When first I muttered, "Orissa Stall", they took me to the Exhibition held at Pragati Maidan. But it was not possible to go to the Exhibition ground so late at night. When I said "Orissa Bhavan" and they took me to Chanakyapuri.

Finally, we arrived at Basu Barding House. The Manager made all arrangements for me in a large room and said, "Please sleep here. Things will be all right in the morning."

The taxi had been engaged for three to four hours. I asked the driver, "How much?" He said, "Please pay for the fuel. I won't charge you anything more. Aren't I a human being?" The Manager offered to pay the driver. I requested my unknown rescuers to write their names and addresses in a pocket diary, which I brought out from my coat pocket. They were Abel Rajinder Massey, Raman Lal, Sujan Singh, Prem Chand and Sarbji Singh. The taxi number was DLY 463. I have treasured the diary.

The news of my accident spread next morning. Sunil Kumar Satapathy, the producer in the music section of Cuttack

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

radio station, who was staying in a hotel nearby, came to see me. He offered me comfort and also cautioned me, saying, "The police have started investigating the accident, which occured on the Hanuman temple road last night. I heard that the driver of the autorickshaw died. A man suffered a knee fracture. Another person was lying unconscious and a few persons took him somewhere in a taxi. Please don't tell anyone about the accident. Once you report the matter to the police, there will be no end to your trouble.

Who else but the Almighty came to my rescue?

The Executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi was scheduled to meet that morning. The members of the jury had given favourable opinions on Kali Charan Patnaik's *Kumbhar Chaka,* which won the award that year. I felt happy.

I was in great pain. I could not move. My head reeled at times. I cancelled my other programmes in Delhi and came back to Bhubaneswar.

After I saw the dream of Lord Raghunath's idol breaking up and becoming whole again I had become almost sure that I was going to meet with an accident. The dream held out a hope for me. As the broken parts of the idol came together, I thought I could be able to survive the danger. The dream became a reality.

Another incident took place a few months before I left the Akademi. The Akademi office functioned on the ground floor of the Museum building those days. One day, while I was working in my room, my colleague Jagdish Kanungo, accompanied by the renowned sculptor, Mukund Moharana of Raghunathpur, came in.

Jagdish Kanungo said, "Moharana came to the office in connection with the exhibition. He wanted to see you."

I said, "I am glad to see you. Moharana. You know, I shall leave the Akademi after a few months."

I wanted to take a piece of sculpture with me when I left the Akademi. Moharana wanted to know what sort of statuette I would like. When I expressed my desire to have an image of Lord Jagannath in *khadi* stone, he expressed his surprise,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

saying, "Sir, you are the Secretary of the Akademi. Don't you know that Jagannath idols are not made of stone?"

I became aware of my mistake and kept quiet.

After about a month, Moharana came to my office. A packet lay in the rickshaw. He wanted me to send someone to get it. When the packet was brought to the room, Moharana removed the paper with which the idols were covered. My eyes dazzled when I saw the beautiful idols.

After a while I said, "How much should I pay you?"

Moharana smiled and said, "I have made it of neem wood, observing habish. The idols are priceless."

I brought the three idols to my residence, where they were kept in an almirah. I could not decide what to do with them, whether to keep them in our prayer room observing all the proper rites.

One day, my younger brother Bibhuti, who was working in the Electricity Department in Choudwar, told me that he met an old astrologer, who told him that something inauspicious would happen to us soon. I dismissed such a prediction but felt nervous all the same. I thought of my mother, who was ill. At night I received a telephonic message that the condition of Sibu, the nine-year-old grandson of my widowed sister, who was suffering from meningitis, was serious. He had been rushed to the ESI Hospital at Choudwar.

On being informed of this over phone, we rushed to Choudwar. But all our efforts proved futile. Eminent doctors from Cuttack and Choudwar tried their best to save his life. A doctor, in a last effort to revive him, pushed a three or four inch long needle into his chest. But nothing worked. I watched him helplessly as he breathed his last.

A few days after this, I asked Bibhuti to bring the pundit to our house, when he would visit his office next.

The pundit came to our residence one day. He was nearly eighty and was a tall man. Old age had made him stoop a little. He wore ill-fitting clothes. He carried an almanac and a few pieces of paper in a cloth bag slung over his shoulder. When he spoke, he was full of energy and liveliness. He often

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

quoted Sanskrit slokas in the course of conversation. He seemed somewhat familiar with political affairs at the national level.

The pundit had a wash. Then he took off his shirt and shoved it into his bag. He helped himself to the refreshments we offered him.

I now said, "Your prediction has come true. The last fortnight has brought us much pain and grief."

He said, "I said nothing. The Lord made me say what I did."

I told him everything relating to my recent dreams and the accident. Then I asked. "What should we do with the idols? Should we gift them to a temple? Or, should we immerse them in the sea? We find ourselves in a terrible dilemma."

His reply was firm and clear, "You must install them in your own house and offer them worship. Simple."

"Who will offer him worship?" I asked.

"You, of course."

"When I am away from home?"

"Your brother, Bibhuti babu, will do the puja."

"When the two of us would be away?"

"The ladies of the house will do the job."

"When they would be absent?"

"Anyone in the family, even the neighbours could offer worship to the idols. In fact, anyone could do this job."

I expressed my reservations, saying, "This is a strange suggestion. We have children. Deities are worshipped in consecrated places. How could we worship them properly in a family?"

The pundit said, "What matters is a pure heart. Didn't Lord Rama accept fruits from a tribal woman, who had already tasted them?"

All my doubts thus laid to rest, I decided to install the idols in our house on the auspicious day of Akshaya Trutiya. On the day the idols were installed, the pundit himself, performed the ceremony.

Every year, on this day, our friends and relations come to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

our house to partake of the *mahaprasad* offered to Lord Jagannath. When relationships, familial as well as social, disintegrated all around us, we were lucky to join our friends and relatives at least for a day.

Even after the deities were installed at our house, I did not change my way of looking at dreams. I did not look upon my belief that they indicated the shape of things to come as superstition. Just as a small boat sailing down a rivulet finally gets to reach the ocean by way of a bigger river, a human being may move closer towards the Almighty with the help of a person possessed of miraculous powers.

True, the world around us is full of frauds claiming to be god-men. But this does not mean true saints do not exist. One sometimes has the good fortune of coming across them. If I believed that someone was a saintly person, I tried to find out about the source of his miraculous powers. Such a person irresistibly drew me towards him. Here, an incident, which took place in February 1993 is worth recalling.

At this time of my life, I felt I was adrift in an ocean of misery. I had no one but the Lord to turn to. During these dark days, an invisible hand guided me towards light, showed me a way out.

My son came back to Orissa in 1981, after completing his higher studies in Bombay. I was worried about his future since I was going to retire from AIR soon. He was determined that he would translate his dream of setting up an industry into a reality. Around this time, the Government of Orissa loudly proclaimed that it would set up a thousand industries in a thousand days.

I once happened upon Sanjib Hota, who was the Director, Industries at the time, at AIR. I told him that my son, Cheena, had applied to the Government for assistance for establishing a small-scale industry. I inquired about the problems he was likely to face. He replied saying that the Government had directed the departments to treat industrial entrepreneurs with special favour.

Cheena set up Kusum Chemical and Pharmaceutical

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Factory at the industrial estate at Rasulgarh in Bhubaneswar. To finance this partly, we had to mortgage our only plot of agricultural land, which was in my wife's name. The rest of the amount had to be borrowed from institutions such as IDCO, Finance Corporation and State Bank of India at compound rates of interest.

However, the factory could not start production according to schedule. The Banks were supposed to provide the working capital. But it took years for them to advance the loan. By this time, the factory became 'sick' under the crushing burden of accumulated interest on the loan already taken. This fate was shared by eighty percent of entrepreneurs in the small-scale industries sector in Orissa.

A number of factors were responsible for the failure of the 'thousand industries in a thousand days' scheme. Young Oriya entrepreneurs did not have the capital necessary for making their ventures succeed. They had little experience about the industries they were starting. The scheme had no provision for giving them necessary training. Most of them came from families, which had no business background. The government, for its part, thought its duty ended after it lured these young men into the world of entrepreneurship. No steps were taken to market the goods produced in these factories.

The greatest threat to the young entrepreneurs came from corrupt government officials and their habit of looting people by creating unnecessary bottlenecks. One had to bribe officials at every step along the way or else one got stuck. As a result, industrial units became sick in no time.

When a unit was declared 'sick', the creditors seized its assets and sold them off to recover the loan amount. If the money received from the sale was less than the total amount of the loan and the interest, the balance was realised by selling off the mortgaged land, or from the guarantor. This was a time for celebration for the employees of the credit-giving institutions. They connived with the buyer of the sick factory and sold it at a price, which would be far lower than what it was

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

really worth. For their services, they received a handsome kick-back.

I did not want my son's factory to meet a fate like this, for, apart from mortgaging land for raising money for his factory, I was also his guarantor. Had the factory been seized and sold off after being undervalued by corrupt officials, I would have had to pay what remained of the loan.

A notice was served on Cheena's factory. I shuddered at the prospect of facing financial ruin when the factory would be seized. There was only one way out: if someone bought the factory and agreed to remain responsible for its assets and liabilities, the creditors would transfer the factory to him. But it was difficult to find such a buyer before the factory got seized. Oppressed by a fear of the future, I kept praying to Lord Jagannath.

During this crisis, I had an extraordinary experience, which hinted at things, which were to come to pass. One day, I was going down a road in the Lodi Estate. Suddenly, I do not know why, I stopped in front of a temple. Steps made of marble led up to it. I did not know what deity was being worshipped there. Hundreds of men and women bought flowers and joss sticks from a shop nearby and made their way into it in silence. I followed them. Inside, I found a large hall with a marble floor, at one end of which was a high platform. The figure of an old man in marble was seated in a chair set on it.

The devotees handed the flowers to the priest who sat before the platform. The priest offered the flowers to the seated figure and gave the devotees a packet containing *prasad*. Some left the hall after receiving *prasad*; others sat down on the floor and prayed. I followed the example of the latter. I closed my eyes and prayed to Lord Jagannath and the statue of this unknown saint seated before me. When the crowd thinned somewhat I got up, approached the priest and asked, "Whose statue is this, panditji?" He was taken aback. "Don't you know this is Sirdi Saibaba?" he said. I bowed to the saint once more and left. It seemed to me as if Sirdi Saibaba had cast a spell on me and drawn me into his temple. I had heard of him, but I could

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

not remember if I had seen his photograph earlier.

Outside, at the flower shop, my eyes fell on a book having a red cover bearing the title, *The Wonderful Life and Teachings of Shri Sai Baba.* It was priced at eighteen rupees and fifty paise. I was eager to buy it. But, when I took out the money to pay for the book, the shopkeeper, a young boy, said, "No, I won't sell this book."

"But why?"

"I have been ordered not to."

"By whom?"

"By Him."

"Who is He?"

"The Baba."

We now entered into an argument.

"Is the Baba alive?"

"No, he is dead."

"Then who gave the order?"

"The Baba himself."

"How strange ! He is dead and yet He gives you orders!"

"Yes, He did so. I won't sell the book to you."

I tried to reason with the boy. "I am very keen to find out more about the Baba. This book is not easily available in our part of India. You could always get more copies of the book."

But all in vain. I turned away disappointed. "Listen." someone called me. I made my way back to the shop. "Here, take it," the boy said, as he handed me the book. A strange glow had lit up his face. I said, jokingly, "So you have got His order?"

"Yes."

"But how? Did you see Him?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear His voice?"

"Yes."

"How strange !"

"The Baba is everywhere."

I now offered him the price of the book. But he seemed to have gone into a trance. He refused to take the money, saying,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

"I have been ordered not to accept it."

I pressed him again and again, but he remained adamant. At last I said that I would buy flowers worth eighteen rupees and fifty paise and immerse them in river Mahanadi, taking the Baba's holy name as I did so.

The same night, when I rang my son, he said, "A gentleman came today and offered to buy the factory. Please come home soon."

The factory was sold off. We survived our misadventure unscathed. After this, I came to believe more strongly than ever before that the Lord would deliver one from danger if one surrendered oneself totally to him. His grace would manifest itself through a dream, an extraordinary event, or through the mercy of a saint, who might be dead or alive. However, one should not forget that there was no dearth of frauds and charlatans passing themselves off as saints. One should follow Kabir who said: "Do as the bee does: flit from flower to flower to suck honey, and forget about the shortcomings of others."

By the time I left AIR, I had learnt two lessons very well. The famous Marathi playwright, Mama Warerkar had made a very important point in the course of the speech he delivered on the occasion of Vishuv Milan: "carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, engineers, doctors, and lawyers received some kind of training before they entered their respective professions. The need for training was not at all felt in the world of theatre. Here, anyone could set himself up as a director after acting a couple of times on stage. How could theatre make any progress under the leadership of such inexperienced ignoramuses?"

The other lesson I learnt on the day I left AIR to take over as the Secretary of the three Akademies. Kandhaswami was Director, AIR at the time. He was a well-known Tamil writer. His short stories and plays were published under the pseudonym, Turaiban. Later, he won the central Sahitya Akademi award. At the function held to bid me farewell, he gave me a valuable piece of advice: When you join the academies as Secretary, you'll feel that you could do so many things, big and

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

small, to improve their conditions. If you try to do all these, you'll lose your way in the labyrinth of administration. In the end, you will find that you have achieved nothing at all. You must therefore decide what your priorities are. Take up only those tasks, which could be completed during your tenure. Make sure that the completion of these tasks will have an enduring impact, will enrich art and literature in Orissa directly or indirectly. This advice lit up the path before me like a flash of lightning.

When I became Secretary, Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi, I organised a short-term workshop and training programme on stage-craft at Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya in 1974. This was prehaps the first systematic attempt in this direction in Orissa. Young theatre artists who took part in this programme included Dhirendranath Mallick, Ratiranjan Mishra, Akshay Mohanty (Kashyap), Surya Mohanty and Narayan Pati. This was, for many of them, the beginning of life-long commitment to theatre. In 1975, a drama department was added to the twelve existing departments of Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalay. Ananta Mahapatra and I prepared the syllabus for this new course after going through the syllabi of drama departments of various universities and that of the National School of Drama. The next year, Bijay Mohanty and Ajit Das were appointed as Lecturers in Drama at the Mahavidyalay. I was subjected to all kinds of pressure at the time. But I stood firm, insisting that these jobs should go to persons, who had received formal training in Drama. At last, the selection committee and the government saw the point in my argument. The two new appointees held degrees from NSD, the most prestigious teaching institution in the field in the country.

The thought that Bijay should join the Sangeet Mahavidyalay had crossed my mind when he was still a student at NSD. In the last year of his course, he occasionally wrote to me. Two things about him attracted me: his beautiful handwriting, and his powerful acting. I had not seen him act in an Oriya play before he came to attend the interview. But I had the opportunity of seeing him act in an English play. I was in

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the habit of going to watch plays whenever I spent some time in Delhi. Once I went to see a student production at NSD. The play, which was being staged, was John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Originally staged in 1956 in Britain, this play had given British theatre a new direction. NSD staged the play at the hall of Rabindra Bhavan in Delhi. Half the space was set apart for the audience. The other half was used as the stage. Bijay Mohanty, then a final year student, played the central character. His way of rendering the character left an indelible impression on me.

I also had another memorable experience that day in the hall. The performance had begun. Someone made his way in the dark gingerly and squeezed himself into a seat in the row below mine. The lights came on when the play ended. I saw someone I was not expecting to see there sitting at my feet. "Uttam, how come you are here?" I asked. Uttam is my son-in-law Manas's cousin. After completing his studies at Baripada, he went to Delhi, to realise his dream of becoming an actor. Both Bijay and Uttam came from Baripada. They both saw the same dream. That day I not only discovered the great acting talent of Bijay, I also sensed Uttam's determination to become an actor.

The committee, which interviewed candidates for the post of Lecturer at Sangeet Natak Mahavidyalaya, included the Secretary, Department of Culture, the Director and myself. I put a few questions to Bijay regarding his performance in the play, *Look Back in Anger*. The other members of the selection committee did not ask him any question. During the interview it became clear to us that Oriyas, who pursued their studies at the National School of Drama in Delhi, lost touch with the theatre scene in Orissa. Nevertheless, I hoped that, given a chance to work in Orissa, they would not only teach students dramaturgy, they would also use their training, engage in experiments and bring the Oriya stage at par to stages in other states. However, this hope remained unfulfilled for several reasons.

For one thing, theatre was not a financially attractive

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

option. As a result, trained theatre artists increasingly turned to cinema. For cinema in Orissa this proved a great blessing. The world of Oriya theatre did not benefit from their presence all right, but the film world began to flourish. The attempt to attract Oriyas who had received advanced training in the field of theatre failed. However, it must be admitted that, from such an attempt, the state as a whole gained in the end.

By the time I joined Sangeet Natak Akademi, a shadow war was in progress there. The antagonists were two eminent experts in Odissi music: Kalicharan Patnaik and Singhari Shyamasundar Kar. Patnaik lived in Cuttack, and Kar in Puri. They were members of a sub-committee, which had been entrusted with the task of preparing the syllabus for a course in Odissi music. Their relationship was a strained one. One routinely opposed whatever the other said. In the process, the preparation of the syllabus got delayed and students became restive. The Akademi received a lot of flak. And yet, it was impossible to frame the syllabus exluding one of these two experts. To end this deadlock, I had to resort to a clever plan.

I consulted Dhiren Patnaik, who was a scholar of Odissi dance. He advised me to send for the Principal of the Mahavidyalay, Dr Minati Mishra, the famous Odissi dancer. I asked her to frame the syllabus for the course in Odissi music with help of Lecturers in Odissi music. The syllabus was prepared in a very sort time. Dhiren babu went through it and gave it his approval. This draft syllabus I sent to both Patnaik and Kar by registered post. In the covering letter, I wrote to them that if they had anything to add to or delete from the syllabus, or suggest any changes, they should get back to me within fifteen days. If I did not hear from them during this period, I would take it that they had given the syllabus the seal of their approval.

Neither of the two sent any communication, for they did not want to enter into the complications involved in reviewing a draft syllabus. The syllabus came to be accepted, and a period of unnecessary tension came finally to an end.

Students were taught Odissi music according to this

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

syllabus until the Mahavidyalay got affiliated to Utkal University in 1979. The students received certificates and degrees from the Akademi, but their degree certificates had little value for they did not bear the stamp of a University. There was now no option but to get the Mahavidyalay affiliated to Utkal University. The first requirement for affiliation was an assurance from the government that it would extend financial support to the Mahavidyalaya in future. This I obtained, and then I proceeded to complete other formalities involved in getting affiliated to the University. A fee of one thousand rupees for each of the thirteen departments had to be deposited along with the application for affiliation. I think no other University or Deemed to be a University in the country offered so many drama or music courses.

Since Utkal University had no provision for teaching these subjects, a new faculty called Music Faculty was set up so that it could affiliate Sangeet Mahavidyalaya. This faculty awarded degrees such as I.Mus., B.Mus., and M.Mus.

Before the new faculty could be set up, a few measures had to be taken by the University. The chief among these was forming a Board of Studies for music, dance and drama, which would frame the syllabi for different subjects. The Board of Studies formed by Utkal University included Dr Premalata Sharma, who was the Head of the Department of Music, Benares Hindu University and who later became President, central Sangeet Natak Akademi. The Chairman of this Board was Dr Minati Mishra.

Here again I ran into unforeseen difficulties. A member of the Board, who happened to be a teacher of the Mahavidyalaya, raised all kinds of unnecessary objections and delayed the process of framing the syllabus. I watched helplessly. Since the whole thing was happening in a sphere outside my area of influence. The thought that the work of getting the syllabus approved by the University before I left the Akademi would not be done began oppressing me.

A solution offered itself unexpectedly. Those days, the fish market near Bhubaneswar railway station was the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

meeting place of the residents of Bhubaneswar every morning. There I occasionally ran into Natabar Mohapatra, who hailed from Kujang and was a friend of my younger brother, Bibhuti. He was a head assistant at the office of Utkal University. I knew that a head assistant could get something done when his superior officer might be of no help. So, one day, I said to him, "Nata, could you do me a favour?" Nata was taken aback at this unexpected request and asked, "Tell me how I can help you." I said, "I'll talk to you over phone later." The next day I went and met him at the University office. I said, "Nata, I must get this affiliation business out of the way before I leave the Akademi. If I fail to get the Mahavidyalaya affiliated to the University, I'll feel that my coming to the Akademi served no purpose at all." Nata suggested that the person who created all kinds of problems at the committee meetings could be dropped, if I wanted, for the term of the committee was going to expire. I did not agree to his suggestion. I said, "He has acquired a lot of clout by giving private tuition to the children of powerful people. Even if he is dropped from the committee, he'll find other ways of making mischief and prove more dangerous than before. Since there is no expert in drama in the committee, how about including me in the new committee? This gentleman is a Lecturer in the Sangeet Mahavidyalaya. If I become a member of the committee, I can handle him."

My suggestion was carried into effect. I became a member of the new committee. According to rules, the members elected the Chairman in the first meeting of the new committee. Before the meeting was convened, I told Minati, "If you wish your college well, propose me as the chairman of the committee." She agreed to do so. In the first meeting of the committee, the draft of the syllabus, which had been gathering dust for over a year, got approved. The aforementioned gentleman did bring in some trivial arguments over Odissi music during the discussion of the draft syllabus, but I silenced him, saying "If the syllabus does not get approved today, and if the University refuses to affiliate the college, you'll have to

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

take the blame. If you have problems with this syllabus, you could revise it next year, but let's first obtain affiliation from the University." Good sense prevailed on the gentleman, and he did not raise any objections. The chief hurdle to obtaining affiliation from the University was thus removed.

A team of inspectors appointed by the University made an on-the-spot inquiry before an institution was permitted to affiliate itself to the University. Their report on the infrastructure of an institution, the number of its students, its staff position, its library and playing field, and the financial support needed for running it helped the syndicate take a decision on affiliating it to the University. On the team of inspectors, who came to inquire into the affairs of the Mahavidyalay, included Dr Manmathnath Das, Professor Khirod Kumar Patnaik, and my friend, Tarun Ray, who was the head of the Drama department, Rabindra Bharati University. Since the needs of a college specialising in teaching drama, music and dance are different from those of a general college, I had asked Nata to include an experienced person like Tarun Ray in the committee. The team gave a very favourable report. At long last, overcoming near impossible odds, the Mahavidyalaya got affiliated to Utkal University. I felt a great sense of relief and expressed my immense gratitude to God. At long last, young artists would no longer find themselves in a pitiable situation simply because they did not possess certificates from a recognised educational institution. If they so desired, they could even compete for all India services.

When I was Secretary, Sangeet Natak Akademi, annual meetings of the state Secretaries were organised under the auspices of the central Sangit Natak Akademi. Here, the programmes of the state Akademies for the year were discussed. The meeting used to be hosted by the government and the state Akademies. Once I went to Trichur in Kerala to attend one such meeting. I attended another such meeting at Hyderabad. The third meeting of the Secretaries of the state akademies was held at Jaipur. During all the meetings, an attempt was made to acquaint us with the art, music, dance and

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

culture of the host state. These meetings were wonderful opportunities for cultural exchange, for educating oneself about the cultural heritage of another state.

My experiences at Jaipur, however, were different. I arrived there in the morning on 26 June 1975 by train. The pink city was waking up lazily. Arrangements for our accomodation had been made at the well-appointed government circuit house, which stood at the city centre. A few Secretaries had already arrived there. I was to share a room with Mehrotra, who was Secretary, Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi. It was at the circuit house that I got to know that emergency had been declared the night before. A radio announcement had been made in the morning. As a student of law, I had read about the article in the Constitution, which provided for the declaration of emergency. But the fear imposition of emergency inspired in everyone I experienced a few hours after setting foot in Jaipur.

Around nine in the morning I went out with a friend to buy a newspaper, for no newspapers had come to the lounge of the circuit house that day. There was an eerie silence all around. Even small shops had downed their shutters. Only a few people wandered in the streets, but they were vague about what had happened. Some said that a large number of opposition leaders had been arrested, and that many more would get arrested soon. No one seemed to have a clear idea as to what happened when a state of emergency was declared. As the day advanced, a nameless terror seemed to oppress people's minds. Everyone came to look upon the other with suspicion and mistrust. A bustling city turned mute, as it were. The meeting of the Akademi secretaries was held in a perfunctory manner. It was presided over by Mohan Khokar, a scholar of dance, who was then Secretary, central Sangeet Natak Akademi. Three days later, I left for Cuttack, feeling disheartened and disturbed.

On the way back, I broke journey at Delhi and spent two days there. I always made a point of calling on my friends there even when my stay in Delhi was a short one. This time I

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

went to meet my friends, Bijay Das and Jiban Pani. Das was in charge of the Oriya department of National Book Trust and Pani was an officer of the central Sangeet Natak Akademi. I also called on Giridhar Gamang, who was then an M.P. Later, he became a member of Union Council of Ministers. He had a sharp mind, and he delighted us with his witty remarks. One could see that the soul of the art-loving tribal culture was very much alive in him.

In Delhi, too, one could feel fear in the air. Several opposition leaders had, by this time, been sent to jail. Censorship had already been imposed on newspapers. I arrived back in Bhubaneswar. Smt. Nandini Satpathy was Chief Minister of Orissa at the time.

A few months before the state of emergency was imposed on the country, an insecure government at the centre had already started making preparations for clinging to power at all costs. It was particularly scared of Jayaprakash Narayan, who led the anti-government agitation. Jayaprakash was to address a massive public meeting in the parade ground (it has since been converted into a park after the assassination of Smt. Indira Gandhi) in Bhubaneswar. The state government resorted to an ingenious plan to render JP's meeting a non-event.

Like every city, Bhubaneswar too was possessed of a character of its own. If any function was followed here by free entertainment, people came in large numbers to watch. People who turned out on such occasions included low-salaried employees as well as big officers, students and members of the general public. The government was aware of this side to life in Bhubaneswar, and it now relied on it to execute its ingenious plan.

Ever since Orissa became a separate province on 1st April 1936, the Utkal Divas was celebrated every year on the 1st of April. Now, the Government decided to celebrate it with pomp and ceremony on the parade ground. It was decided that an entertainment programme and fireworks would follow a meeting presided over by the Chief Minister on that day. Eminent artists of Orissa were invited to take part in the programme.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Arrangements were made to organise performances of Dalkhai dance of Sambalpur, Chadheia and Ranapa dances of Ganjam and Ghumura dance of Kalahandi on this day. Famous fire-work makers of Cuttack were invited to take part in the display of fireworks. The programme was given wide publicity through the Information and Public Relations Department. The real purpose, however, was to lure people away from JP's meeting. Although I was aware of the government's game plan, as a government servant, I had to see to the arrangements.

A.N. Tiwari was Secretary, Culture at the time. A few days before Utkal Divas, he communicated to me the government decision to hold the function. He told me that the expenses on the cultural programme would have to be met by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, as the Government would find it difficult to arrange the funds on the first day of the new financial year, which began on the 1st of April. Later, the amount spent would be reimbursed to the Akademi. This was the accepted practice of raising funds in emergency situations. I had to do as I was told.

The organisers of JP's meeting were denied permission to use the parade ground. So, in the last minute, they made arrangements for holding the meeting at another place in the town. I very much wanted to go there, but I had to oversee arrangements for the cultural programme to be held on the parade ground. Dhirendranath Patnaik and Jagadish Kanungo assited me. I felt quite restless. There was a special reason for this.

In 1970, my play *Sarisrupa* (The Reptile) was broadcast by AIR, Cuttack. The next year, on the 9th of August, a version of the same play, now bearing the title *Amrutasya Putrah* was staged at Cuttack. Although I am not sure if JP had enunciated his theory of total revolution before I wrote *Amrutasya Putrah*, there is no doubt that a philosophy similar to that of JP informed my play.

The central theme of *Amrutasya Putrah* concerned an attempt to rebuild a society on the wreckage of the old order. I

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

was eager to listen to JP's speech for I thought he would dwell on a similar theme while expounding his theory of total revolution. But there was no way I could attend the meeting. However, I had made arrangements for my family members to attend it. Later, I was told that many government officers had done the same.

During the emergency, the third Eastern Zone Cultural Meet was organised in Bhubaneswar from 28 January to 6 February 1976. To mark the occasion, an industrial exhibition was organised by IPICOL. Arrangements were made to seat three thousand persons under an awning in a field at Unit-III. The Sangeet Natak Akademi was entrusted with the task of organising the cultural programme on this occasion. Since my residence stood close to the exhibition ground, I supervised the preparations round the clock. A.N. Tiwari, who was then the Secretary, Department of Culture, played a key role in organising the cultural meet, in which eastern states such as Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh took part.

Distinguished artists and intellectuals of Orissa participated in the seminars and other programmes organised on the occasion of this cultural meet. They included Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Kalicharan Patnaik, Muralidhar Tali, Gopinath Mohanty, Bidhubusan Das, Krushna Chandra Panigrahi, and Jatindra Mohan Mohanty. This cultural meet was, without doubt, an attempt to divert people's attention from the excesses of the emergency.

To mark this occasion, a souvenir was brought out by the Department of Public Relations. It carried an article by Subrat Mukherjee, who was Minister of Information and Public Relations in the Government of West Bengal. In it, Mukherjee openly welcomed the imposition of emergency and argued that it had saved democracy. The emergency had placed unlimited powers in the hands of the Government and it was often used by superior officers to harass and vicitimise their subordinates. I had a bitter taste of this.

Two days before the cultural meet was inaugurated, I

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received news from Cuttack that my wife's elder brother, Braja Kishore Mohanty had been detained under MISA. He was a popular lecturer at Cuttack Engineering School and a well-known radio and stage artist. This news came as a bolt from the blue. We could not find any reason why he should be arrested.

A day or two after the cultural meet began, I received a telephonic message that the Home Secretary wanted me to meet him. At the time Bighna Raj Patel was Home Secretary, Government of Orissa. I had heard that he was a highly competent officer and a man of principle. His childlike simplicity set him apart from his fellow civil servants.

Patel belonged to Sambalpur. Since a programme of Sambalpuri dance was to be staged within a day or two, I thought he would want to discuss it with me. But when I met him at the Secretariat, I found that he had something entirely different in his mind.

The red light at the entrance to the chamber of the Home Secretary indicated that no one was to be allowed in. A peon from the P.A.'s room rushed there, half opened the door and said, "You can go in, Sir."

Perhaps Patel was relaxing after lunch. He cordially said to me, "Please take a seat." He asked his P.A. to call the Deputy Secretary. He also ordered three cups of coffee. After a while, Sudhansu Mohan Patnaik, the Deputy Secretary entered the room and occupied a chair. Patnaik placed a file in front of the Secretary. Coffee was served. Patel opened the conversation.

Patel How is Braja babu related to you?
Now I guessed the reason of his sending for me.

Myself : He is my wife's elder brother.

Patel : Do you know he has been arrested?

Myself : I came to know about it after I received a telephone call from our Cuttack residence.

Patel : Do you visit him often?

Myself : He was staying in the Engineering School campus. Our house was in the Station Bazar. I visited him

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whenever I found time or whenever there was any need to see him.

Patel : (Almost interrupting) When did you visit him last? Do you remember?

Myself : Almost a year ago or maybe a little more than a year since I came to stay in Bhubaneswar. (After thinking a while) No, I don't remember exactly when I visited him last.

Patel : Did you know his association with the Ananda Margis?

Myself : No.

Patel : Do you know if he performed puja with human skulls?

Myself : Skulls? In his house? No, I know of no such thing.

Patnaik showed a part of the file to Patel, who read out a few lines to me.

Patel : The report says, he had gone to the level of *Sad Bipra*, a stage of the Ananda Margis' *sadhana*. See, this is the report of the police (pause) Government, especially the Chief Minister, does not want to detain anybody unnecessarily except those against whom there is a police report. Can you do one thing?

Myself What can I do, Sir?

Patel : Can you get an undertaking from him stating that he neither has, nor will have any connection with the Ananda Margis. If he does so, the question of releasing him will be considered.

Myself I do not know his views. Still I'll try.

With this, that day's conversation came to an end.

I sent a message to a relative, requesting him to meet Braja babu in Jajpur jail. After meeting him in the jail, he informed me that, since Braja babu considered himself completely innocent, he did not agree to give any undertaking. I found merit in the argument. I met Patel at a function after a couple of days, and informed him of my brother-in-law's decision.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Braja babu spent quite a few days in jail. He was shifted from Jajpur to Bhubaneswar. Reputed political leaders including Harekrushna Mahtab, Prahlad Mallik, Pratap Chandra Mohanty, Biswabhusan Harichandan and Braja babu, who were detained under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, were his fellow inmates at Laxmisagar jail. After twenty-one months, MISA came to be lifted, and they were all released.

History says Emperor Nero was playing a musical instrument when Rome was burning. Similarly, Government organised industrial exhibitions and cultural functions in Bhubaneswar at a time when ordinary people were detained in jails at different parts of the country.

I resented the strange attitude of ministers and bureaucrats towards artists and artisans. The previous year, in 1975, the world Telugu Conference was organised at Hyderabad, which I had attended. Besides visiting Salarjung Museum, Golconda Fort and the huge vineyard of a friend, I attended most of the sessions organised at Lal Bahadur Stadium. Programmes were held round the clock for three consecutive days and were attended by Ministers and senior officers. At least one Minister was present in every session, even if it was held late in the night. It reflected the exemplary sincerity of the Government in trying to make the programmes successful. The Chief Minister,Vengal Rao and the Education Minister, Krishna Rao visited the guest houses, dining halls and even looked to the cleaning of toilets.

I remembered the World Telugu Conference when the Eastern Zone Cultural Meet was organised. I felt sad and shared my feelings with Dhirendranath Patnaik. Delegates from nine states of the eastern zone attended the conference at Bhubaneswar. No one bothered to find out how they were accommodated in the Music College building. Ministers and high-ranking officers were present only when the Chief Minister of Orissa or of West Bengal came to attend a session. But they were nowhere to be seen when a seminar was held. This sort of indifference of the higher-ups towards art and artists hurt me.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

A memorable event that took place during my tenure as the Secretary of the Akademi was a seminar on Odissi dance. The seminar was organised in Bhubaneswar in July 1975, with financial assistance from the State Government and the central Sangeet Natak Akademi. By that time, Odissi dance had already received recognition as a classical dance form. The dance had been widely acclaimed in India chiefly due to the efforts of Kelu Charan Mohapatra. However, a lot still remained to be done when I took over the charge of the Akademi. I was lucky to have Dhirendranath Patnaik, an expert in the field, as my colleague.

Gurus, research scholars, artists and others who were associated with propagating, studying and promoting the dance form were invited to the two-day seminar. It was decided that the proceedings would be recorded and transcribed, and then published in book form, after necessary editing. It was thought that the book would serve as a valuable document for future reference.

Kabichandra Kalicharan Patnaik presided over the seminar. Among others, people like Satyanarayan Rajguru, Kelu Charan Mohapatra, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Raghunath Panigrahi and Minati Mishra participated in the seminar. Light was thrown on many aspects of the dance, which were not known to many. A book entitled *Odissi Nrutya Alochana* (Discussions on Odissi Dance) was brought out in 1978. The book was a valuable contribution to knowledge on Odissi dance.

In 1976, a novel plan was worked out to preserve Odissi music for the posterity. This plan enjoyed the support of the Chief Minister, Nandini Satpathy and the Principal Secretary, Ramakant Rath. Sangeet Natak Akademi received a special grant for the purpose. As the Secretary of the Akademi, I had to work hard to execute the plan.

It was a joint venture of the Government of Orissa and the Gramophone Company of India Ltd. The famous 'His Master's Voice (HMV) company had already been transformed into the Gramophone Company of India Limited, The head office and the recording studio were located in Calcutta.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Mr Sud was its Managing Director and Mr Biman Ghosh its Programme Executive. According to terms of the contract, recording would be with company funding and the records would bear the trade mark of the company. The choice of the singers, accompanists and musical instruments would be the responsibility of the Government of Orissa.

The renowned Odissi signer, Balakrushna Dash was chosen as the music director. A list of the artists was drawn up. Ramakant Rath took the entire responsibility of selecting the songs. The selection of the songs written by reputed poets was really excellent and was representative of ancient Oriya poetic tradition.

After the list of artists was finalised, arrangements were made for the rehearsal. Artists regularly attended the session, and Balakrushna Dash conducted the rehearsal. I used to be present at the rehearsal sessions, which were at times attended by Ramakant Rath. It had been decided to use only the traditional instruments and not the western ones. It had also been decided to prepare five records including three long playing ones.

The record, which carried ten songs by the famous mediaeval Vaishnav poet Gopal Krushna, was named as 'Gopalkrushna Padabali' (Songs by Gopalkrushna). The songs, which mostly dealt with the love between Radha and Krushna, were sung by reputed singers such as Shyamamani Devi, Raghunath Panigrahi, Bhubaneswari Mishra, Balakrushna Dash and Indira Pratihari.

Another LP carrried songs written by the eminent Oriya poet, Kavisurya Baladev Rath. Mostly based on the Radha-Krushna love, these songs were also sung by well-known singers including Bhikari Bal, Padmalaya Gorabadu and Prafulla Kar besides Bhubaneswari Mishra, Shyamamani Devi, Balakrushna Dash and Indira Pratihari.

The third LP contained prayer songs addressed to Lord Jagannath, and the artists who lent their voices included Akshay Mohanty, Mohammad Sikandar Alam, and others, most of whom also sang for the other two LPs.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

A person like me who was uninitiated to music felt overwhelmed at the time of the recording. I nursed a secret desire to use Odissi music in one of my plays. Later, I used one such song in the play, *Nandika Keshari.*

Rehearsals for recording the songs were over. The camp shifted to Calcutta for recording the music. One day, Ramakant Rath visited us in Calcutta. The mission was a success. All the five records were launched with great fanfare by the Chief Minister, Nandini Satpathy in Bhubaneswar. Mr Sud, the Director of the Gramophone Company, was present at the launching ceremony. The five records represented Odissi music in its pure form.

I felt relaxed when I returned to All India Radio in Cuttack in January 1980. Three of my plays, *Klanta Prajapati, Bitarkita Aparanha* and *Nandika Keshari* appeared after this year. My relationship with different regional and national institutions continued even after my retirement in December 1982. I served as a member of the general council and the Executive Board of Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi for two terms. I also worked as the Convenor of the Oriya Advisory Board during the period from 1993 to 1998. Initially, I considered the job of the Convenor a burden, but later I came to enjoy it.

After my retirement from All India Radio, when I continued to be associated with the central Sahitya Akademi, I got plenty of opportunities to come in contact with poets and writers, many of whom were new.

In 1992, I received the Governor's Plaque of Honour. The same year, the honour was also bestowed upon Kahnu Charan Mohanty, Sitakant Mahapatra, Ajit Keshari Ray, Balakrushna Dash and Kelu Charan Mohapatra for their achievements in different fields of excellence. The honour had been instituted by Orissa State Council of Culture. After I returned to Cuttack, I was awarded a Senior Fellowship by the Department of Culture, Government of India. I utilised the time to write the play *Nandika Keshrai.* I was also selected as an Emeritus Producer for the period 1984-87 by the Department of Information and Broadcasting. There were not many Emeritus Producers in the

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

country those days. In 1994, I was one among the six persons in the country who were given Emeritus Fellowships.

It was easy to find out about theatre in England, America and other English-speaking countries, but there was hardly any opportunity to learn anything about the situation of dramatic art in communist countries. I had submitted a proposal to the Indian council of Cultural Relations to visit the USSR and other communist countries to gather first-hand knowledge of theatre in these countries. I was not very serious and had forgotten all about my proposal.

One day, I received a reply from Smt. Usha Mallik, Under Secretary to the ICCR, who later became the Secretary of the central Sangeet Natak Akademi, informing me that I had been selected to participate in the cultural exchange programme. The letter also carried the details of my proposed tour.

I was not part of a team rather I had to travel alone. My itinerary was arranged in such a manner so as to include three countries, Bulgaria, Poland and the USSR. I had to board Air India's Delhi-London flight to go to Rome, from where I was to take another flight to reach the Bulgarian capital, Sophia. During my trip, I was to stay in Sophia, Warsaw and Moscow, and from there I was to visit other places of interest. It was planned that I would return from Moscow to Delhi in December 1983.

The letter did not bring me unmixed joy. I used to suffer from broncho-allergy almost every winter. It continued to torment me for about two months. I was afraid, I might have to return to India half way through the programme. However, Dr Gangadhar Behera, Professor of ENT, SCB Medical College and Hospital, Cuttack advised me to take certain medicines with me. He also told me that I would be safe from attacks of allergy in cold climates, since there was very little moisture and dust in the air. Snowfall had already begun by mid-November, when I reached Poland. Arrangements for my stay had been made in Victoria Hotel. A sympathetic young man named Morasky, who was a graduate in English from

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

Warsaw University, was my interpreter.

I had a memorable interview with Professor M. Christopher Byrski of Oriental Institute of Warsaw University on November 11, 1993. He was an authority on Oriental literature and culture. I was deeply impressed with his simplicity and wisdom.

Morasky took me to the office of Professor Byrski, who had been waiting for me. A few students and research scholars were present in the room. I was thrilled to notice a picture of Lord Jagannath placed under the glass on his table.

Pictures of gods and goddesses were hung on the walls of the office room and the corridors. Professor Byrski introduced me to his students, among whom there was a young lady named Elizabeth Waltier. She had spent three years at Visvabharati University, Santiniketan and had visited Bhubaneswar, Puri and Konark. Professor Byrski told me that Elizabeth could speak Bengali well and understand a bit of Oriya.

I was pleasantly surprised to see an Oriya book on Professor Byrski's table. It was a collection of Polish poems translated into Oriya by Professor Shyam Sundar Mohapatra of Visvabharati University, in collaboration with Elizabeth Waltier.

Professor Byrski knew a lot about Sanskrit and Hindi literatures. He could recite the *slokas* from *Srimad Bhagvad Gita*. He narrated to me that he had stayed in Bhubaneswar for about ten days and had visited Puri. The Grand Road, Car Festival and *Chhera Panhara*—everything figured in our discussions. We discussed Ramshankar's play *Kanchi Kaveri* and the *dandi bruta* of Sarala Das's *Mahabharat*, which bore a lot of resemblance with free verse. Professor Byrski appreciated the use of folk forms in modern drama. I told him of Girish Karnad's *Hayabadan* and my play, *Katha Ghoda*.

The next morning I went to Cracow, the former capital of the country, where I stayed in Hotel Kracovia. The capital had shifted to Warsaw in the seventeenth century. I saw a number of places of historical significance. In the evening, I took a tram to visit the famous Star Theatre. The play, *Dream of a*

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Clown, a dramatic version of the German Nobel Laureate, Heinrich Boll's novel, was being staged there. The novel revolved round a love story set in Hitler's Germany. Hans, the protagonist of the novel, is a clown of a cabaret group. This liberal young man has an affair with a girl named Maria, who hails from a staunch Catholic family. Maria marries a rich and established man and forgets Hans's love for her. He drinks, loses his job and begs. The direction of the play was realistic; the setting and lighting arrangements were superb.

On my return, I wrote my diary and went to bed late. In the morning, I found the surroundings covered with snow. The rays of the morning sun glittered on the snow and presented a beautiful sight.

After a couple of days in Cracow, I went to Wroclow, which was known for Walesa, the famous leader of the labour movement. Walesa later became the President of the country and won the Nobel Prize for Peace. Wroclow was also famous for another reason: the Theatre Laboratory of Jerzy Grotowski was situated there. Grotowski was perhabs the most important theatre personality in the world after Stanislavsky and Brecht. Educated at Cracow and Moscow, he carried out his experiments in his laboratory in Wroclow. The place meant a lot to the people associated with the stage the world over.

My days in Poland and the Soviet Union were spent wandering in the snow-covered streets. I visited Leningrad. Before the Russian Revolution, the city was called Petersburg. And after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Leningrad came to be renamed Petersburg. The temperature of the place had fallen below zero when I reached there. The waters of the river, Niva that flowed through Petersburg, had turned to large ice-slabs. I visited museums, theatres and participated in literary discussions. My fear that I might be compelled to cut short my visit due to a possible attack of broncho-allergy proved unfounded. My experience was enriched with the wealth of a rich cultural heritage.

On my way from Delhi to Sophia, I had to break journey at Rome, where I had to spend a couple of days before

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boarding a Sophia-bound flight. Professor K.B. Pawar of the Geology Department of Pune University traveled in the same plane. He had to stay for two days in Rome and deliver a lecture at the University. Professor M. Fornasari of the City University, Rome had come to the airport to receive him. Professor Pawar introduced me to him. While leaving the airport, Professor Fornasari requested me to attend the meeting in the University and to visit a few important places in the city. Both Professor Pawar and myself spent the night in a hotel called Airport Palace.

My friend in Delhi had cautioned me against getting cheated in Rome. Although we were careful, we were cheated on one occasion. We needed a taxi, whose driver knew English. The receptionist of the hotel had arranged a taxi for us and collected a commission from the driver. We had to pay twenty-five dollars for a distance of only thirty kilometers !

Professor Fornasari took us in his small car to show us round. It was November. Winter arrived late that year. There were showers of rain followed by sunshine. People called it Cleopatra weather. The Professor was quite familiar with the city. He would stop at important places, and like an experienced guide, explain to us their significance. We moved along the road on the bank of river Tiber. At some point our car would take a turn back to the city and then the Professor would remark, "All roads lead to Rome." He would show us the buildings, roads, important places and say, "Rome was not built in a day."

The car made a halt at the ruins of the famous colosseum of Rome. Visitors had gathered to see this huge archaeological wonder, which dated back to B.C. 75. It was called Amphitheatreum Flavianum, where took place boxing, several gladiatorial events, and killing of enemies by throwing them to the cage of a hungry lion. In the past, the colosseum had fifty rows, with the provision for about 87,000 spectators. When we negotiated the steep road to the colosseum, the Professor halted at a place and plucked a few leaves and gave them to us. The leaves, like our Basang leaves, had a nice smell. He said that,

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in the past, Romans wore crowns made of these leaves.

Among other things, we visited the 'Forum', the open commercial centre of the ancient Roman Empire and the seat of Jupitor on Capitol hill. We also saw the Senate in the Capitol area, where Julius Caesar had been assassinated in the first century B.C. It was here that Caesar said to Brutus, "Et tu, Brute." The scene from Shakespeare's play flashed before my eyes when I stood there.

We also saw the marble figure of Minerva, the wonder of Michaelangelo's sculptures and the balcony of Mussolini's house, from where he used to address his people.

We went to a restaurant at the bus terminus, took some refreshments before we bade good-bye to the Professor. It was time for us to catch the Sophia-bound flight.

The Mediterranean climate prevailed in Bulgaria. There were pots full of fruit juice, butter milk, butter and cheese on the dining table in the hotel where I stayed. Unlike in Poland and in Soviet Union, here we found plenty of vegetarian food.

In Poland I traveled by tram a number of times. When the trams stopped, the doors opened automatically. Similarly, the doors closed before the trams started again. There was no conductor to check tickets. Passengers punched their tickets before boarding a tram.

While in Russia, I visited the Russian cruiser, *Avrova*. The waters of river Niva had frozen. One morning, when I went to visit the ship, rays of the sun glinted on the ice. The cruiser belonged to the days of the historic Russian Revolution.

The University of Petersberg (now Leningrad) served as the centre of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The blast of the canon from the cruiser, which I visited, signalled the beginning of the revolution to the revolutionaries. For this reason the cruiser gathered historical significance.

I noticed that a newly wed couple visited the cruiser in that cold morning. They stood near the cannon, touched it, and offered a floral tribute there before leaving.

I spent most of the afternoons and evenings visiting museums, theatres, ballets and puppet theatres. I interacted

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

with writers, directors and stage artists. I also attended a few meetings of the artists' unions. I visited the memorial museums of Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky. The house of Chekhov, who was a doctor, had been preserved. I saw the waiting hall of the patients, the place where he examined the patients, his chair, table, bed, files and pictures. A visit to the Gorky Museum made me feel as if the occupant of the house had gone on a brief outing. Gorky came to stay in this house after the Russian Revolution. The notebook, paper weight, a few pages of a manuscript, glasses, the pen and the knife he used—all these had been preserved in a glass frame on the table. There were twenty-two pencils of several colours, which he used for correcting the proof. Gorky's study room was full of books.

Like the houses of famous writers, the house of the eminent stage director and actor, K. Stanislavsky had also been preserved. It was a huge building, almost like a palace. I climbed the wooden stairs to see his ballroom, which he later converted to a small stage and an auditorium. The individual rooms had been painted differently — one red, another yellow and a third one blue. Stanislavsky lived in that house till his death. During the last few years of his life, when he was ailing, he managed the affairs of the Moscow Art Theatre from here. The photographs of the plays he directed and the plays in which he acted were preserved in this house. There were also photographs in which he posed with writers and artists.

I remembered the helpless last days of Kali babu's life while visiting Stanislavsky's house. As in the Russian artist's bedroom, there was also a telephone beside the bed of Kali babu. But there was a significant difference in the lives of the two artists: the whole nation stood behind the Russian artist whereas the poor Oriya artist was a very lonely man during the last days of his life.

There was a specially made armchair in one of the rooms. The curator told us that Stanislavsky had seen such a chair during his tour of the East European countries. He had ordered the carpenter to get a chair made in the same style for

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

the production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. The Russian Encyclopedia, books on theatre and works of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Pushkin, Turgenev, Moliere, Schiller, Gogol, Racine and Maeterlinck were kept in the shelves.

In one room were kept the costumes he used at Moscow Art Theatre. These included the one he had put on while playing Hamlet. The gown he had worn while playing a role in Maeterlinck's symbolist play hung inside a frame. A make-up table used by him on which lay crepe, wigs, knife, brushes, a pair of scissors, etc. was also preserved. A high chair stood beside this table. Suddenly, the guide said, "Why don't you sit on this chair for a while?" I was a little confused and, hesitated. Then I sat down on the chair. I felt a thrill passing through me, a thrill that I had experienced when I first saw a play in my village or I finished writing my early plays.

Visiting the Theatre Museum (Bakhursan Museum) was a memorable experience. This was founded by a wealthy Russian before the October Revolution. The collections for the Museum began towards the end of nineteenth century. After the Revolution, the Government took over the Museum. Although in the post-revolution era, private property came to be confiscated, Lenin, who was fond of art and culture, spared this Museum. The founder of the Museum, Bakhursan, was allowed to function as its Director. Perhaps this was the largest Theatre Museum in the world. The exhibits here included costumes, masks, wigs, stage properties, sketches of stage settings and photographs.

What appealed to me most were the cardboard, plastic or plaster of paris models kept within glass frames. As I moved from room to room looking at exhibits, I asked the curator, "A few years ago, a Russian troupe staged the play, the *Ramayan* in Bhubaneswar..." Before I could complete the sentence, he said, "Please come with me. We have the sketch of the Bhubaneswar production here." When I was the Secretary, Sangeet Natak Akademi, this play had been staged in a few cities in India, which included Bhubaneswar. It fell to me to see to the arrangements for its production. Since the facilities

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

for producing the Russian play at Rabindra Mandap were not adequate, a simple setting had to be worked out. The curator now showed me this design. I was delighted.

I remembered how theatre brought human beings together in spite of religious, ethnic and linguistic differences. After the performance was over, the Russian actor Gaewindin Pegsa, who played Rama, took me aside and presented me with a book on porcelain art of Russia. He wrote on its first page: "In good memory,... Rama, 20.1.77." Through gestures, he conveyed the message that I must meet him when I visited his country. But unfortunately, I could not meet him during my stay in Russia. I remembered him as I stood admiring the sketch of the Bhubaneswar production of the *Ramayan*. I thought, a museum like this would help expand the mental horizon of playwrights and theatre directors in India. But alas!

After I came back to India, I met the Minister of Culture, whom I knew very well. The Minister asked me, "What did you see in Russia and other countries?" I said, "I saw many things there, especially the world of theatre. Not all those things can be done in India. But there is one thing, which could be done here, if you desire. This would involve very little expense and would contribute a lot to the development of theatre in Orissa." He asked me to meet him in his Bhubaneswar residence and give him a detailed proposal.

After trying to contact him from Cuttack several times over phone, I managed to get through to him. I reminded him of our earlier conversation. He seemed very interested and said, "Please come to my residence around 8.30 A.M. one of these days. We will find some time to discuss things, undisturbed." I suggested that we meet on a day on which he had no other engagements in the morning. I requested him to give me an appointment. The Minister checked his diary and gave me a date. On the appointed day, armed with brochures and notes, I set out for Bhubaneswar early in the morning, riding my battered Lambretta scooter. I reached the Minister's residence at 8.30 AM sharp.

I sent in a slip and waited in the Minister's residential

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

office. After a while, a cup of tea was brought for me. A little while later, the Minister himself followed it. He had a look at the theatre brochures and photographs. Our conversation now centred on the situation of the theatre in those countries. I had a mind to narrate my experiences at the Bakhursan Museum and end by pleading that a theatre museum be set up in Bhubaneswar, where theatre materials from different parts of Orissa could be exhibited. Here many materials, which would soon disappear, photographs and information, could be preserved for posterity.

I went on narrating my experiences, looking at the Minister's face from time to time to see if he was suitably impressed. On the impression I made on him, I felt, depended the future of theatre in Orissa. Suddenly I noticed the Minister rested his elbows on the table, propped his face on his hand and closed his eyes. I guessed he was listening to me in rapt attention. But I soon discovered he was dozing, not listening to what I said. He now woke up with a start and yawned. I was lost for words for a while. Then I asked, "Perhaps you went to bed late last night." The Minister smiled and said, "I arrived in Bhubaneswar early this morning. Have had no sleep at all." I said politely, "Please take rest. I shall come some other day." This seemed to please the Minister.

A car pulled up outside. The Minister looked at me and said, "I have to go again. Things have not been sorted out in that place." The Minister asked his PA to fix another day on which he would be absolutely free. "We shall have lunch that day," he said and left. The invitation for the lunch never came.

I was invited to talk about my experiences abroad by a number of organisations, which included the Universe, Cuttack, the Drama Society of Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, and Lekhak Samukhya, Bhubaneswar. At all these places I spoke mainly about the world of theatre in these countries.

In Sophia, I watched a play entitled *Theatre My Love* at "Theatre, 199". The hall could seat only 200 people, almost as big as Tarun Ray's Theatre Centre in Calcutta. The play revolved around only two characters, played by two

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

middle-aged women. For two hours these two actresses kept the audience spell-bound. I thought that running a theatre like this in a place like Orissa would not be difficult at all. This play had proved that the play was the thing, and that the size of the auditorium did not matter. It also proved that good actors were necessary for good plays. At Military Theatre, I had the opportunity to watch Bernard Shaw's *Devil's Disciple*. The hall had a revolving stage. This was the first Shavian play I watched.

Another play I watched on the day I left Bulgaria was an unforgettable experience. It was Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* at National Theatre in Sophia. Brecht was noted for making subtle use of Marx's thought in his plays. Many Indian admirers of Brecht staged his *Mother Courage, Galileo,* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in different Indian languages. Of Brecht, the famous theatre critic Kenneth Tynan had said, "Once in a genearation the world discovers a new way of telling a story. This generation's pathfinder is Brecht, both as playwright and director of Berliner Ensemble. (*Tynan on Theatre,* Pelican, 1961).

The plot of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was a simple one. The ruler of a country was deposed in a coup. The ruler's wife left her baby son behind when she fled during the coup. Her maid-servant gave this child shelter and looked after him. After the coup was put down, the ruler returned to his country. Now the problem was: Where should the child go? To his mother or to the maid-servant who had saved and nurtured him during the coup? The judge decided that the child belonged to the maid-servant, and not to the mother. Brecht gives the message that a thing belongs to him who can do it the most good.

In the last scene of the play, the boy is made to stand before the judge. A circle is drawn around him with a piece of chalk. His mother stands on one side; on the other side stands the maid-servant. Both stretch their hands out at him. The boy, however, rushes into the maid-servant's arms. The play was based on a medieval Georgian folk tale. Incidentally, a Georgian theatre troupe staged the play in Sophia. The production,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

which took every care to remain faithful to Brecht's original production, enthralled me. Two other famous plays, which I had the opportunity to watch while in Poland, were Heinrich Boll's *The Clown's Dream* and *The Clown*.

During my stay in Poland, Moraski showed me a number of buildings. Some of these had been razed to the ground. Others lay in ruins. Poland, and its capital, Warsaw, were the theatre on which several European wars were fought. The country had suffered terrible losses during the Second World War. The sufferings endured by the Polish in the aftermath of the war were dramatised through six characters in the play, *The Clown*. Another play which left a lasting impression on my mind was *November Night*, a historical play. A part of Poland had remained under Russian occupation in the past. The play dealt with this painful chapter in the history of Poland.

I got the opportunity to see a remarkable play called *Replica* (The Reply) at Theatre Studio in Warsaw. It was a pantomime brilliantly directed by Jozef Szajna. I found it difficult to fit the play into any particular category. That night, after watching the play, I wrote in my diary the following: 'This is non-conventional theatre. It lasted only fifty-five minutes on the stage and involved only a few words. Every scene in it was based on a discrete idea. The ideas found expression through the movements of the actress, their formations, gestures, stage property (sometimes a toy was lowered from the top; sometimes a gun and a machine gun advanced towards the actors), music, and even, silence. The play was enacted in a hall having an asbestos roof, which seated three hundred spectators on a wooden gallery.

I had never come across a successful integration of Impressionism, Expressionism and Surrealism in the staging of any other play. This play had already been staged in a number of countries outside Poland and had received much acclaim. Its brochure reproduced the following excerpt from a review in *The New York Times*. 'All Kings, Presidents and Prime Ministers should see *Replica*. All members of the United Nations should also see it. This spectacle should be seen by the whole

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

world'. Of the play, the brochure had this to say: 'What is it about? About the agony of our world and about our great optimism.' We manifest a revolt against unnecessary death. Neither many words nor superfluous gestures are needed to stir a genuine sense of drama.

I was keen to visit two theatres in Moscow: Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, and the famous Malay theatre. I was not able to visit Moscow Art Theatre on account of the annual repair work going on. However, my disappointment was mitigated somewhat when I got an opportunity to see Stanislavsky's house, which had been made into a museum. Malay Theatre I found most impressive. It was older than Moscow Art Theatre. Built in the second decade of the 19th century, it ensured that Russia occupied a pride of place in the world of theatre. The arrangements for lighting and sets in this gorgeous and gigantic theatre were superb. Through lighting tricks one was made to feel as if one was sitting under the open sky with the horizons encircling him. I watched the production of *King Ivan*, an historical play there. The Church, which stood at the background of the stage, seemed miles away, close to the horizon. To match the passage of time within the play, the position of stars in the sky also changed. The intensity of the light falling on the church spires changed accordingly. All this served to create in my mind an impression of immensity.

At Gorky Theatre in Leningrad, I saw *Wolves and the Sheep*, a play by Alexander Ostrovsky (1823-1886). Ostrovsky was the greatest dramatist of Russia in the nineteenth century. He occupied the same place in the hearts of Russians that Moliere did in the hearts of the French. A number of his plays were staged at Malay Theatre. For staging his plays the simple production style popular in the nineteenth century was adopted. No attempt was made to create stage illusions through special lighting effects nor were multi-set settings used.

While in Russia, I also got the opportunity to watch mime theatre and operas. Operas were similar to our *suangas* and old musicals. Whenever I went to see a play, an interpreter,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

who translated everything for my benefit, accompanied me. Ballet is another important feature of Russian cultural life. At Leningrad, I got the opportunity to see a Russian ballet. I also saw puppet theatre, where life-size puppets were used.

I brought two small things with me when I came home from my trip abroad. I brought a few bottles of Bulgarian rose perfume for a friend, and a pocket theatre binocular. Theatre-goers in Russia carried binoculars, for the ballet halls there were so big, one needed a binocular to see the gestures and expressions of ballet dancers clearly. I also brought with me an invisible gift: memories of the theatre worlds of the countries I had visited. Whenever I looked at flocks of birds flying across the sky through my binoculars from the balcony of Pathachhaya, memories of the past returned. The Bulgarian rose perfume blended with the fragrances of Rajnigandha flowers in my garden and filled the empty hours of my life with joy.

I had not written any plays after I wrote *Nandika Keshari* in 1985. My life now came to be dominated by routine. I did odd jobs for the central Sahitya Akademi and the central Sangeet Natak Akademi. For six years, I served as a member of the Cuttack branch of Central Board of certification. As a member of the expert committee for the Eastern Zone Theatre Festival organised by the central Sangeet Natak Akademi, I attended theatre festivals held in Bhubaneswar, Patna and Jamshedpur. These did keep me busy somewhat; but a feeling of emptiness oppressed me for I had not done any creative writing for a long time.

In the mean time, annual awards for best radio plays had been instituted. A committee consisting of six or seven experts, who selected the best plays, had been set up. I worked for two years as a member of this national committee. We had to do the difficult job of going through the English/Hindi translations of sixty to seventy plays and listen to their recordings. While doing this, my earlier conviction regarding the importance of the script grew stronger.

It so happened that, when we took only the production

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

quality of the plays into account, some plays having weak scripts got the award. I had no doubt that, with better scripts, these plays would have achieved a much higher quality. I tried to put this point across to A.R. Sindhe, who was Director General, AIR at the time. We were very close friends. I requested him, saying, "Please institute a national award for the best script. If the quality of the script is not good, the effects or music etc, however, innovative, cannot render a play successful." My argument convinced him. He was an experienced officer with a vision. He said, "Please get the jury to send a proposal to this effect. I'll try my best to get the Government to accept this."

That year the jury proposed in the report that an award for the best script be instituted, and backed their proposal with strong arguments. Sindhe was as good as his word. He got the proposal approved by the Government.

After retirement, I associated myself with Kala Vikash Kendra, Cuttack for five years from 1991. I was also elected its Working President. Besides, I was invited regularly to deliver speeches at various cultural functions held at different places in Orissa. At these meetings I mostly talked about the theatre scene in Orissa, and compared it with theatre in India and abroad. I sometimes dwelt on issues relating to Oriya culture and Oriya identity. I tried to explain how the distinctive identity of the Oriya race was the foundation on which Oriya culture rested.

One day, the Principal of Tirtol College, Bishnu Prasad Mahalia came to my residence and requested me to go to his college as Chief Speaker at a college function. Bishnu babu was an old student of Kujang High School. I knew him well. I had spent thirty years of my life in Kujang and knew it intimately. I knew so many people there, and was familiar with almost every corner of the place. I let myself be carried away by nostalgia and agreed to go to Tirtol College.

A few days later, Bishnu babu arrived and said, "The function will be held on the 10th of February." I asked him, "Who else has been invited?" He said, "Biju Patnaik will be the Chief

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Guest and he'll inaugurate the function." I interrupted him, saying, "I can't go. You invite someone else to be the Chief Speaker." Bishnu babu was quite upset. He said, "We have fixed the programme according to Biju babu's convenience. He has already approved of the programme, in which your name figures. How could we explain to him this change in the programme? You know how moody Biju babu is." I said politely, "Please don't misunderstand me. Biju babu is a great leader. We feel proud when we mention his name outside our state. I respect him highly. The point is I have decided not to attend any cultural function to which a political leader is invited." The principal was stunned. I went on, "You want to know why? The reason for taking such a decision is a simple one. Over the years I have seen that political leaders come to cultural functions to throw out a political bait to people. Culture matters to them not at all. They don't hesitate to canvass for their party while on the stage. I don't like this. This is why I won't go to functions to which political leaders have been invited."

Janaki Ballav Patnaik was then the Chief Minister of Orissa. The Janata Party had launched a compaign against his Government. As part of this campaign, Biju babu had undertaken a *padayatra* in Tirtol and its neighbourhood, which was a strong citadel of Janata Party. There was nothing wrong in my expecting that he would use the college function for political purposes. This was the reason why I was reluctant to go to this function as Chief Speaker. But the Principal insisted, "We are all eager to have you there." But I was adamant. He asked me, "How do I explain to Biju babu why you did not come?" "Don't tell him something like I have suddenly taken ill. Repeat to him whatever I told you now verbatim. He may lose his temper and suggest that you find a substitute for me." The Principal had nothing to say, and he took leave of me.

He came back to me in the afternoon the same day. I asked, "What brings you here now?" He said, "I had gone to Biju babu's residence."

"Did you meet him?"

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"Luckily for me, Biju babu was at home. I told him everything you had said to me."

"What was his reaction?"

"Maybe, he was in a good mood. He said, "Manoranjan is right. Go and tell him I won't utter a word about politics. He must join me at Tirtol." At last I went to the function as the Chief Speaker. Jharana Das, the film actress, accompanied me. We arrived in Tirtol a little early. Much care had gone into making the function a colourful occasion. The platform on which guests were to be seated had been raised so as to enable people to see them. The arrangements seemed a little excessive. From the Principal's office room I could see a stretch of the Kujang-Cuttack road which ran up to the Tirtol canal lock. Suddenly, faint noises came from the directions of the lock. Then it seemed as if a sea of humanity was surging towards us. The sound of *khols*, cymbals, conch shells, bugles and trumpets filled the air. The darkness receded. Biju babu was on his way to the venue of the function, having finished his *padayatra* for the day. His path had been illuminated by the light of petromax lamps and torches. Taking long strides, Biju babu led this mammoth procession. He was flanked by a few leaders of his party.

Biju babu and the other leaders came to the Principal's office, where we were waiting. His followers went to the venue of the function. Now the guests were served snacks on plates, which included mutton fried in spices, and cheese, fruits and sweets. Biju babu ate heartily. Perhaps he was tired from walking. When he found that I was not eating meat, he suggested that I be served more cheese. Biju babu's healthy appetite reminded me of Mahtab babu's. I saw him once at Swaraj Ashram nearly fifty years ago, eating a bowl-ful of mango pulp mixed with rice flakes and molasses. These leaders had a good appetite. Shortly afterwards, we proceeded to the dais.

On the dais, a few Janata Dal leaders such as Pratap Mohanty and Damodar Rout sat beside Biju babu. After inaugurating the meeting by lighting the ceremonial lamp, he took a look at the agenda, and announced, "First, Manoranjan will

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speak. I have given him my word of honour that politics will not figure at all in my speech today." I now rose to speak. I said, "Many parties have come to power since independence. They have promised that they would do a lot for the literature, drama, music, sculpture and dance of Orissa. But they have all deceived people with their sweet talk." After these remarks I proceeded to talk at length on Orissa's cultural distinctiveness. I had spent days preparing my speech after I had decided to address the meeting. I elaborated on the distinctive cultural identity of Orissa, and how we should not allow this identity to be erased in our pursuit of modernity. I contended that, in this cut-throat times, it is our culture which would enable our young men to get ahead in life. While giving my lecture, I noticed that Biju babu was listening to me with rapt attention. Other political leaders spoke after me. However, taking a cue from Biju babu, they steered clear of politics while addressing the audience.

At last, Biju babu rose to speak. I felt nervous. I wondered what might be his reaction to my bitter criticism of the neglect of culture on the part of successive Governments, one of which had been headed by Biju babu himself. But to everyone's surprise, he said, "You are absolutely right. No Government in Orissa has done anything for its art and culture. I have also done nothing and I am ashamed of this." Then he went on to talk about the past glory of Orissa, its maritime trade and the great emperor Kharavela. Biju babu, whose heroism had made him a living legend, displayed extraordinary courage by admitting in public his failures and mistakes.

Memories crowded my mind during my leisure hours. The distant past and the immediate present blended into each other. People once close to me moved away and people who were distant moved closer. I remembered the warmth I had received from many. I recalled how I felt a thrill as I received citations amidst the applause of the crowd. A sense of fear lurked in my mind: Can I live up to the expectations of the people? I kept in touch with many of them. I visited many

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

friends; a few also paid visits to me. My days passed in the pleasant company of many old and young friends.

I noticed that I had grown old. Seven to eight years had passed since I wrote *Nandika Keshari*. I had not written anything substantial in the mean time. I was 72. I grew conscious of the fact and thought of writing something other than plays. I was ailing then. I asked myself: "Can I complete a work, if I begin it now?" Most of the time during those days of tension I remained absent-minded. Almost every afternoon, I used to sit on the balcony of my house and watched flocks of birds winging back to their nests. I also watched the clouds drifting in the sky and the sun sinking into the western horizon.

It was one such afternoon when Abadhut Rao came in, unnoticed. He sat facing me and said, "Watching the sunset?"

"Yes", I said.

"You have been watching the sky for so long?"

"Yes."

"Memories crowd into your mind?"

"Yes."

"What about recording and preserving them for posterity?"

His words made me start. What did he say? I said, "Is it necessary at all?"

He replied, "You are not the judge "

He cited the lines from the *Bhagabat Gita*:

Fare forward and wait not for the fruits of action.

"It's your duty to write. Do your duty," he said.

I said, "Where shall I begin?"

"Begin from the beginning," was his reply. Without further delay, I set to work on that very day, the 6th of December 1992.

Many diseases had made my body their home. I consulted my doctor friends, who gave me strength and offered advice. I shall always remain grateful to them. The diseases proved a blessing to me. Since I could not move about much, I remained stuck in a place most of the time and could write.

When I was in the middle of writing the story of my life,

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

it was found that I suffered from cardiac problems. My wife also suffered from a heart disease. Both of us went to Delhi for a check-up at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. We are grateful to our friend, Bijaya Dash for the help he rendered to us there. He was the Public Relations Officer at AIIMS. After a thorough check up, the doctors advised us to continue the treatment, which we had.been undergoing in Cuttack. We went to Delhi from time to time for our medical check-up.

Time rolled by. I grew increasingly feebler. How to bring the narrative of my life to a satisfactory close kept bothering me. It had been five years in the writing. In the afternoon of 5th December 1997, Abadhut Rao came in and sat down in front of me silently, just as he had done on the day I had started writing my autobiography. He asked me, "Have you finished?" I kept quiet. He said, "Look at the western horizon. "What do you see there." "The sun is going down at the end of the day," I said. He got up, saying, "Recall what I had said five years ago: Begin at the beginning and end where it ends." Then he left. Who was Abadhut Rao? I wondered. Was he a part of myself? Was he a seer, who could penetrate the veil of time? Was he the helmsman of the boat of my literary life floating down the river of time? He had recited a sloka from the Gita, which had solaced me when I had lost confidence in myself.

Karmanye vadhikarestu ma phalesu kadachane
Ma Karmaphala Heturbhumate sangosya karmani.

I saluted him in silence, bowed to Lord Jagannath and ended the story of my life.

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Chronology

1921	Born at Jharkata Patana in Cuttack district on 25 July. Father: Artabandhu Das; Mother: Sulochana Dei.
1930-40	Educated at Ravenshaw Collegiate School, Cuttack and Kujang High School, Kujang.
1940-42	Admitted to the Intermediate class in Ravenshaw College, Cuttack; plays a role in the college drama, *Irani.*
1941-42	The first play, *Ratri* (*The Night*) written and staged; the play is later staged by Roop Mahal, Cuttack under the title *Abhilash* in 1946.
1942	Writes a play entitled *Samasya* (*The Problem*).
	Writes another play, *Trutiya Drushya* (*The Third Scene*); rehearsals take place at Orissa Theatres from which the play is later withdrawn. Prepares the draft of *August Na* (*The Nineth of August*).
1943	Writes *Bekar* (*The Unemployed*).
1943-44	Writes *Yauban* (*The Youth*), which is staged at Annapurna Theatres, Cuttack in 1944.
1944	Fails to appear at BA exam due to illness.
1944-46	Writes *Janmamati* (*The Birthplace*).
1945	Fails BA exams; takes up teaching at Chatua School, Kujang.
1946	Passes BA; joins Orissa Secretariat as an Assistant, writes *Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanj.*
1947	*Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanj* is staged at Orissa Theatres, Cuttack; *August Na* is staged by Janasanskruti Sangh.
1948	Joins AIR, New Delhi as sub-editor in charge of news unit; marries Kusum Kumari; gives up the job and comes to Cuttack.

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1948-52		Writes one-act plays which are later collected into a volume entitled *Nari* (*Woman*)
1949		Writes *Bidrohi Jagabandhu* (later retitled as *Buxi Jagabandhu*), which is staged by Annapurna Theatres, Cuttack. Starts writing *Agami* (*The Oncoming*); becomes founder-member of United Artists.
1950	:	*Agami* is staged.
1950-55		Works as Honorary Vice-President of Kujang Cooperative Bank; starts a small business.
1951		Writes *Abarodh* (*The Siege*).
1953	:	The collection, *Nari* is published; works as Assistant Director of the film *Amari Gaon Jhia*.
1954		Works as associate director and co-script writer of *Kedargouri*, a film produced by Radha Pictures.
1955		Passes LLB.
1956-58	:	Takes up legal profession.
1958-61	:	Joins the regional news section of AIR, Cuttack.
1958-62		Writes one-act plays, which are later collected in a volume *Chhota Natak* (Short plays).
1961		Works as drama producer at AIR, Cuttack.
1962-66	:	Writes one-act plays, which are later collected in a volume entitled *Mahasamudra* (*The Ocean*).
1962-68		Writes one-act plays, which are later collected in *Natya Guchha*.
1964		Receives Orissa Sahitya Akademi award for *Chhota Natak*; becomes one of the founders of 'Srujani'; adapts *Sagar Manthan* (*Churning of the Sea*), which is staged by 'Srujani'.
1966	:	Writes *Banahansi* (*The Wild Swan*).
1966-69		Works as Secretary, Utkal Sahitya Samaj.
1967-75	:	Writes one-act plays which later appear as *Ababahikara Swapna* (*The Dream of the Valley*).
1969	:	*Aranya Fasal* (*The Wild Harvest*) is written and staged.
1969-74	:	Works as Vice-President, Utkal Sahitya Samaj.

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1970-71	Writes *Amrutasya Putrah* (*The Immortal Sons*), which is staged by 'Srujani'.
1971	Receives Sahitya Akademi award for *Aranya Fasal*.
1972	Writes *Katha Ghoda* (*The Wooden Horse*); becomes a member of the executive board of Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi.
1973	Write *Urmi* (*The Waves*).
1973	Becomes member of the general body and the executive board of Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.
1974-00	Appointed Secretary of Orissa Sahitya Akademi, Orissa Sangeeta Natak Akademi and Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi.
1975	Writes *Sabdalipi* (*A Game of Words*).
1976	Hindi translation of *Aranya Fasal* published.
1977	Hindi translation of *Sabdalipi* published.
1978	Hindi translations of *Katha Ghoda* and *Banahansi* published; receives Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi award.
1978-79	Becomes member of the general body and executive board of Sangeet Natak Akademi; writes *Klanta Prajapati* (*The Tired Butterfly*).
1979	English translation of *Aranya Fasal* (*The Wild Harvest*) is published by Oxford University Press.
1980	Returns to AIR, Cuttack; writes *Bitrakita Aparahna* (*Afternoon Flurries*).
1980-82	Writes one-act plays, which are later collected in a volume entitled *Bichitra Manara Natak* (*The Plays of the Strange Mind*).
1981	Wins Sangeet Natak Akademi award; the Bengali translation of *Banahansi* is published by National Book Trust, India.
1982	English translation of *Katha Ghoda* published.
1983	Travels to Bulgaria, Poland and USSR under Cultural Exchange Programme.
1983-84 :	Awarded Senior Fellowship by the Government of India.
1984-87 :	Appointed as Emeritus Producer (Drama) for AIR/ Doordarshan.

Source: Author, Digitized by PPRACHIN, SOA

1984	:	Hindi Translation of *Bitarkita Aparahna* (*Uljhi Dopahar*) published; writes *Nandika Keshari.*
1989	:	Receives Sarala Award for *Nandika Keshari.*
1991	:	Paticipates in 'Meet the Author' programme of the Sahitya Akademi at Calcutta.
1991-94	:	Becomes working President of the Kala Vikash Kendra, Cuttack.
1991-97		Becomes member of the Advisory Board of the Board of Film Certification (Cuttack branch).
1992	:	Receives Governor's Plaque of Honour; starts writing *Smruti Sanlap* (*A Dialogue with Memory*); Hindi translation of *Klanta Prajapati* (*Ek Anupam Yatra Par*) is published.
1993		Bengali translation of *Aranya Fasal* published.
1993-97	:	Appointed as a member of the general board and executive board of Sahitya Akademi.
1994-96	:	Receives Emeritus Fellowship from the Department of Culture, Government of India; becomes a member of the general body of Sangeet Natak Akademi.
1994-97		*Samagra Natak* (*Collected Plays*) is published in 6 volumes.
1996	:	Bengali translation of *Bitarkita Aparanha* is published.
1997	:	English translation of *Sabdalipi* and Asamiya translation of *Aranya Fasal* are published; *Smruti Sanlap* is completed.
1998	:	English translation of *August Na* (*The Ninth of August*) is published.
1999	:	*Smruti Sanlap* is published.
2000	:	English translation of *Nandika Keshari* published.
2002	:	English translation of *Bitarkita Aparanha* (*Afternoon Flurries*) is published.

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Works of Manoranjan Das

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One day watching the sun going down the western sky, **Manoranjan Das** (b. 1921), one of modern India's eminent playwrights enters into a unique dialogue with his memories. What unfolds is the drama of an extraordinarily creative and eventful life, that raised the curtains on an important stage in the development of art and culture in modern India, and particularly the growth of modern theatre in Orissa.

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